

Low-Income, Single-Parent Francophone Mothers and the Educational Achievement of Their Children

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Abstract

This phenomenological study focused on single-parent, low-income francophone mothers' relationships with the educational and cultural achievement of their children attending French-speaking schools in Anglo-dominant settings in New Brunswick (Canada). We conducted individual (N = 8) semi-structured interviews to solicit information about the participants' lived world through their articulated voices and experiences. Qualitative data were analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach. Four themes emerged: parenting and financial difficulties; mother's level of education

and their involvement in their children's education; relationship with their children's school; and parental role in enhancing language acquisition and building cultural identity. Findings revealed that single-parent, low-income francophone mothers need help with parenting skills as they pertain to improving their children's education achievements. We concluded that the New Brunswick government needs to (a) respect its mandate to ensure that the education system teaches and provides opportunities for building a francophone identity, and (b) respect its pledge to make certain that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn, particularly to single-parent women living in poverty, who have limited financial resources.

Keywords: francophone, single-parent mothers, children, educational achievement, schools, Anglo-dominant setting, francophone minority setting

Résumé

Cette étude phénoménologique se penche sur le rapport entre les mères monoparentales francophones à faible revenu et la réussite éducative et culturelle de leurs enfants inscrits aux écoles francophones en milieux principalement anglophones dans la province du Nouveau-Brunswick (Canada). Nous avons effectué des entretiens individuels (N = 8) semi-structurés pour rassembler des informations sur la réalité vécue par les participantes. Ces données qualitatives ont été analysées en utilisant l'approche phénoménologique descriptive de Giorgi. L'analyse a soulevé quatre thématiques : l'éducation des enfants et les difficultés financières; le niveau de scolarité du parent et sa participation dans l'éducation des enfants; la relation parentale avec l'école des enfants; et le rôle parental dans l'amélioration de l'acquisition linguistique et la construction d'une identité culturelle. Les résultats montrent que la plupart des participantes ont besoin d'aide avec les compétences parentales liées à la réussite éducative des enfants. Nous arrivons à la conclusion que le gouvernement du Nouveau-Brunswick doit respecter son mandat d'assurer que le système d'éducation enseigne et fournisse des occasions pour construire une identité francophone. Il doit également remplir sa promesse que tous les enfants entrent à la maternelle prêts à apprendre, particulièrement ceux de mères monoparentales en situation de pauvreté avec des ressources financières limitées.

Mots-clés : francophone, mères monoparentales, enfants, réussite scolaire, écoles, milieu anglophone, milieu minoritaire francophone

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2016 International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) conference held in Daejeon, South Korea, July 31 to August 6.

Introduction

All parents face many challenges on a daily basis (financial, emotional, and psychological), particularly single mothers who are raising their children while trying to meet their basic needs. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) (2004), “single mothers are significantly more likely than other mothers to be poor and to experience financial stress and food insecurity” (p. 16). However, no challenge a mother faces is as pressing as parenting and supporting their children’s schooling (Amato, 2005; Coleman, 2013; Epstein, 2011; Tweedle, Battle, & Torjman, 2013; Women’s Equality Branch of New Brunswick [WEBNB], 2012). Aside from providing sufficient food, clothing and shelter, single mothers are expected to actively participate in school life and help their children with educational tasks (Leblanc, 2009; Jensen, 2012; New Brunswick Department of Education [NBDE], 2009a, 2009b; Ward & Bélanger, 2015). In a linguistic minority setting such as New Brunswick, this school-focused parenting responsibility becomes more demanding for francophone families who are also encouraged to expose their children to varied educational experiences in French, both at home and at school.

The situation of minority-language parents is even more critical among those parents with low levels of schooling, especially single-parent mothers who do not have the resources to become fully involved in their children’s education (Gaudet & Caissie, 2012). Single-parent families headed by women face many challenges that two-parent families do not, worsened by the fact they are among the poorest of all family structures in Canada (Epstein, 2011; Heath, 2012; New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women [NBACSW], 2010; Rothman, 2007; Vanier Institute of the Family [VIF], 2010). Specifically, they are exposed to long-term poverty, and have to overcome not only financial challenges, but also family, social, school, and psychological issues (VIF, 2010; NBACSW, 2010; Raphael, 2011; Rothman, 2007). Women who are heads of lone-parent families have to take sole responsibility for their children’s education, which requires them to link with both the school and community (Epstein, 2011; Heath, 2012).

With few resources at their disposal, it is difficult for many of these mothers to properly support or stimulate their children in their school learning (Epstein, 2011; Jensen, 2012; Savoie & Gaudet, 2010), which is unfortunate because when parents are involved in their children’s school life, academic performance improves (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Jensen, 2012). Single mothers with little education

themselves often feel intellectually and emotionally helpless when trying to help their children regarding school work (Kanouté, 2003, 2006). Their own low level of education is one of the determining factors regarding the poor academic performance of their children (Jensen, 2012). Moreover, the children of poor single-parent families tend to have less education than other children and are more likely to drop out of school (Jensen, 2012; Rothman, 2007).

This situation is further complicated by the fact that women who themselves failed at (or did not complete) school tend to minimize the importance of their children's education (Epstein, 2011; Gaudet & Caissie, 2012; Heath, 2012). This issue becomes more complex for francophone parents because, as role models, they have to provide their children with various experiences in French, at home and in the community, in order to ensure their educational success while maintaining their francophone identity (Cormier, 2005; Duquette, 1999; Landry, 2003; Landry, Allard, & Deveau, 2010; Leblanc, 2009). This scenario promoted the following research question: What are the experiences of single-parent mothers, who are among the poorest in francophone New Brunswick, in regards to school and the educational success of their children?

Of the 10 Canadian provinces and three Territories, New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual (English and French) province with linguistic rights protected by the Constitution. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees each official linguistic community in New Brunswick the right to "distinct educational institutions and such distinct cultural institutions are necessary for the preservation and promotion of those communities" (Government of Canada, 1982, article 16.1). The co-existence of two official-language communities, one being a majority (English) and the other a minority (French), brings forth many linguistic maintenance challenges (Landry, 2010). In New Brunswick, francophone communities are evolving in an environment where contact with the anglophone culture is predominant (Landry, 2003; Landry et al., 2010). Thus, it is becoming more difficult to pass on the French language to the next generation and promote the French-speaking culture among young francophones in New Brunswick (regardless of the socio-economic status of the parents). Although many studies have been carried out on the challenges single mothers face, and their relationship with the school, this study is the first to address this particular group in a francophone-minority setting in the province of New Brunswick and the challenges faced when trying to ensure children can embrace a unique cultural identity.

Literature Review

Single-parent families (i.e., a parent with children and no spouse or partner), represent a significant proportion of Canadian families with children (Rothman, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2006, 2011). In 2011, there were 1,527,845 single-parent families, representing 16.3% of all Canadian families. Over one million (1,200,295) included a woman head of family, representing 12.8% of all families and 78.6% of single-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2011). According to the same census, there were 36,185 single-parent families in New Brunswick, accounting for 16% of all New Brunswick families (28,735 were headed by women, 79% of all single-parent families). Of these single-parent families, one third (32%, $n = 9130$) were headed by francophone single mothers (Savoie, 2004).

Regarding children's academic success, many researchers agree that parental involvement in the education of their children, such as helping with school work, attending school meetings, participating in school events, and encouraging their children, is a strong predictor of their children's success (Epstein, 2011; Jensen, 2012; Leblanc, 2009). There are various ways for parents to participate: being emotionally supportive at home (e.g., offering encouragement regarding school life or listening to their children), helping with homework, attending parent-teacher meetings, and communicating with teachers and other educators (Epstein, 2011; Hamel & Martin, 2001; Jensen, 2012; Leblanc, 2009; NBDE, 2009a). Pupils are ready for school and prepared to learn when they are well rested, have eaten enough, and are able to verbally share their needs, desires and thoughts (Dumesnil, 2003). Along with these factors, parents must motivate, guide and support their children throughout their schooling (Hamel, Blanchet, & Martin, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Heath, 2012; Jensen, 2012; Lamontagne, 2013).

Parents are more inclined to give their children the tools they need to succeed at school when performance and efficiency are highly valued by society (Epstein, 2011; Lamontagne, 2013; Prévôt, 2008; VIF, 2010). Research shows that parents' participation in their children's school life supports children's development and their academic success (Dumesnil, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Jensen, 2012; McDermott, 2009). Nevertheless, some parents have a hard time adequately carrying out their parental role (Amato, 2005; Epstein, 2011; Jensen, 2012; Pourtois, Desmet & Lahayé, 2004). This situation raises concerns regarding single-parent mothers' ability to provide living conditions that are conducive to the well-being of their children as well as their education (Deslandes & Bertrand,

2003; Epstein, 2011; Heath, 2012; Jensen, 2012; McDermott, 2008; Pourtois & Desmet, 1997). A recent survey on the situation and the needs of single mothers on welfare acknowledged that they have strengths that should neither be neglected nor undermined (Service d'orientation et de recherche d'emploi pour l'intégration des femmes au travail [SORIF], 2012). Indeed, studies claim poor single mothers value their children's education and do their best to be involved in their school (Epstein, 2011; Gaudet & Caissie, 2012; Paquin & Drolet, 2007; Paquin & Papillon, 1997).

A minority-language context adds to the complexity of parenting francophone children (Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Landry et al., 2010; LeBlanc, 2009). Unlike parents in anglophone-majority settings, who benefit from an environment contributing to the reproduction of its language and its culture, parents living in francophone-minority settings must create an educational environment conducive to the development of the child in terms of language and culture (Cormier, 2005; Landry & Rousselle, 2003). Most importantly, to ensure the academic success of their children, parents must strive to be facilitators and enablers, and provide their children with rich experiences in French, at home and in the community (Landry et al., 2010; Leblanc, 2009). Unfortunately, in French-speaking areas of New Brunswick, female heads of single-parent families experience poor living conditions and low levels of schooling (Gaudet, 2008; Gaudet & Caissie, 2012; Savoie & Gaudet, 2010), a factor that may impede their involvement in their children's education, and ultimately their children's academic success (Jensen, 2012; Rothman, 2007).

High expectations are well-documented regarding the role families should play in supporting their children in the acquisition of the French language (NBDE, 2009a, 2009b). In 2008, the Commission on Francophone Schools was established to find solutions to the many challenges facing the French school system in New Brunswick in order to ensure that all schools would have sufficient educational resources to prepare francophone students for academic success. In his report, Commissioner Gino Leblanc (2009) maintained that families living in minority communities are expected to fulfill two important parental roles—not only should they be responsible for nurturing their children with French experiences at home and at school, but they should also participate in the francophone community by engaging in cultural activities that promote learning and the development of children's cultural identity. However, single mothers have difficulties supporting their children in their French studies when they themselves have poor French-language skills (Government of New Brunswick [GNB], 2013; NBACSW, 2010;

Savoie & Gaudet, 2010; WEBNB, 2012). The tradition of the francophone family, which once played the role of ensuring the transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage, is struggling in today's Anglo-dominant environment (Landry et al., 2010; Leblanc, 2009).

Although the francophone community in New Brunswick holds equal status to the anglophone community under the law, it still faces assimilation, exogamy (francophone/non-francophone couples), and other sociolinguistic factors similar to other minority communities in Canada (Bernard, 1997; Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Leblanc, 2009). In fact, in a francophone-minority setting, exogamy is a very common phenomenon, with English being the language most commonly spoken in the family household (Landry, 2003; Landry & Allard, 1999; Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Landry et al., 2010). In this situation, many francophone parents have difficulties transmitting the French language to their children, which leads to a reduced number of children who identify themselves as being francophone (Cormier, 2005; Landry, 2003; Landry & Allard, 1999; Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Leblanc, 2009).

The Canadian Association for French Language Education (CAFLE, 2017) explained that building an identity is a highly dynamic process during which people define and recognize themselves according to their way of thinking, acting, and "wanting" within their social contexts and the natural environment in which they are evolving. In order to deal with the problem of students no longer identifying with a francophone identity, schools must ensure the sustainability of the French language and culture in regions where youths experience an increasing insecurity in relation to their language and identity (Cormier, 2005; Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Leblanc, 2009; NBDE, 2009b). In addition, families are called on to collaborate with the francophone-Acadian community to pass on the French language and culture to their children to ensure the survival of francophone communities (Duguay, 2008; Duquette, 1999; Landry, 2003; Landry et al., 2010; Leblanc, 2009).

This qualitative research, therefore, strives to fill a knowledge gap by focusing on francophone female heads of single-parent families in New Brunswick. In earlier research, the authors presented preliminary findings that discussed single-parent mothers and their precarious situation, their children's academic and educational stress, and their relationship with their mother tongue (Gaudet & Caissie, 2012). Although the overall study from which these data emerged was based on the authors' conversations with single-parent mothers and their children's teachers, this article focuses only on the mothers'

views. The findings reported in this current article will focus mainly on issues that help obtain a better understanding of how single-parent mothers (a) cope with their low level of education, (b) support their children's educational achievement, (c) view their relationship with their children's school and teachers, and (d) perceive their role in their children's French-language acquisition and francophone cultural identity development. This study sought to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of single-parent mothers, who are among the poorest in francophone New Brunswick, in regards to school and the educational success of their children?

Methodology

The very nature of the research question points to a qualitative research methodology. To understand the relationship single mothers have with the educational success and cultural identity of their children attending French schools in an Anglo-dominant setting, the researchers chose a phenomenological approach, which attributes importance to individuals' experiences. In general, this approach aims to understand phenomena from what people reveal rather than seeking their explanation through the statement of assumptions (Giorgi, 1997). As a phenomenologist, the researcher aims to explore the lived world with its people and gather their articulation of their experiences. Furthermore, in phenomenology, the voices of the participants are privileged over that of the researcher; therefore, it is important to not only listen to the others, but also value their experiences (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003). With this methodological approach, the researchers distance themselves from any preconceived ideas with regard to the phenomenon being explored. To that end, we adopted an attitude of reduction that helped us put aside any previous knowledge and judgements in order to focus on the phenomenon explored and analyze what was revealed through the participants' words (Deschamps, 1993; Giorgi, 1997).

Participants

Prior to participant recruitment, researchers obtained study protocol approval from the university's Ethics Committee for Research Involving Humans (file #0809-037). First, researchers approached directors of community agencies who could identify single mothers who might be interested in participating in this research. Then, agency officials were

asked to convey a letter to female heads of single-parent families encouraging them to participate. Next, every respondent who expressed an interest in the study was telephoned to arrange for a personal, at-home interview. The final sample frame comprised eight ($N = 8$) francophone single mothers, among the poorest in New Brunswick, living in subsidized apartments located in six towns or cities across southeast New Brunswick. They were aged 25 to 50 years, and had two to four school-age children in their care. All but one participant had completed high school (one had a Grade 8 education).

Data Collection

Data were collected during winter 2009.¹ The main author conducted 45- to 60-minute audio-taped individual interviews in each participant's home to ensure privacy and confidentiality of information (Boutin, 1997; Deslauriers, 1991; Gauthier, 2003). The semi-structured interview included questions regarding the perception of their role as single mothers, their level of participation in their children's school lives, and their parental role in their children's language acquisition and cultural identity development. Per the tenets of phenomenology, they were asked to *talk about their experiences* with these issues. The researcher transcribed the interviews, after which each participant was asked to review her transcript to ensure that the contents accurately reflected the experiences, ideas, and thoughts articulated during her interview. This protocol yielded a concrete and detailed description that reflects the reality of the experience and actions of the participants (Giorgi, 1997; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003). As well, to help in data analysis and the discussion of findings, a logbook was kept noting various situations that occurred during the research. These data collection strategies respected the power of data triangulation.

1 After the study was conducted in 2009, the GNB implemented a poverty reduction plan for 2009–2014. This included intervention strategies and programs in various communities and cities across NB, intended to help single-parent mothers meet their basic needs as well as their children's. Many strategies are still being evaluated relative to their ability to better meet the needs of single-parent mothers in NB (Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2015). In 2012, the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released its new strategy of childhood education, which made early childhood services (birth to the age of eight) an integral part of this department. The last eight years have witnessed the gradual integration of children's services with the education system, and now includes the licensed daycare facilities, and early intervention agencies (Government of New Brunswick, 2012). The francophone school District South's early childhood services team currently works with the District's management team, the department, primary schools, and several partners private and community partners to implement the 2012 childhood education strategy. The harmonization of services allows for the promotion of harmonious school entry.

Data Analysis

Per the tenets of an interpretative phenomenological approach (Daly, 2007; Giorgi, 1997), we engaged the participants in their natural environment and examined how they perceived their life experiences. To interpret the data, we adopted a reduction approach that helped us set aside any previous knowledge and judgements so we could focus on the phenomenon explored in order to analyze participants' responses (Deschamps, 1993; Giorgi, 1997). This entailed applying Giorgi's (1997) four steps of the phenomenological approach to analyze the data. First, we carefully read the data multiple times to find their overall significance. Next, we identified recurring themes. Third, the text was divided into units of meaning, which were made more explicit. Finally, we organized the transformed units into a coherent description of each participant's experience (Giorgi, 1997). The authors kept the units most relevant to this research question, and set the other data aside for future analysis.

Findings

The findings were grouped into four major themes pertaining to single-parent franco-phone mothers regarding their (a) parenting and financial difficulties, (b) level of education and parental involvement in the education of their children, (c) relationship with their children's school, and (d) parental role in their children's language acquisition and cultural identity development. Per thematic research protocol, direct quotes from the participants are used as manifest evidence of the themes, augmented with the researchers' interpretation of latent findings. Participants were assigned a pseudonym (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, Macqueen, & Namey, 2011).

Theme 1 – Parenting and Financial Difficulties

All of the single mothers agreed that single parenting is a very difficult situation to manage. Besides their daily challenges, they disclosed that budgeting was one of their major struggles. They all stated that, as head of the household, they wanted to meet their children's basic needs, but this was very difficult with limited resources. Understandably, most of the single mothers would like to be financially independent to provide for

their children's well-being. As Mia indicated, "I want to become totally independent financially so I can take care of myself and my children." Another participant related that even though she wanted to save money, she felt unable to do so because she did not have the knowledge and skills to do so effectively. She said, "I do my best to put money in a savings account, but it does not really work."

Some participants admitted that budget management in particular presented another challenge because they did not know how to prepare and follow a monthly budget. Joanne said, "I try to make a budget, but I have a lot of difficulties to follow...it's why I lack money." Mia added, "It's hard to budget...this is why I lack the financial resources to buy clothes and other school materials." Their difficult economic situations and lack of basic money management skills created stress that affected their ability to meet the basic and educational needs of their children.

Theme 2 – Level of Education and Involvement in Their Children's Education

Although most of the participants said they valued education and wanted their children to do well in school, some mothers felt they did not have the educational requirements to help their children. Joanne explained that her low educational level made her relationship with the school more complicated: "If I had more education, I would have less trouble with the oldest at school." Jeanne shared the same concern: "When it comes to academic support, I have a hard time managing my child." Yet some mothers wanted their children to do well in school in order to have a better life than they did. Joanne shared her personal experience as an example: "I could not finish my Grade 12... I really would like my children to graduate so they can work." Agathe also stated that same desire: "I want them to be educated, I want them graduating, I want them to take specialized training." Anise believed that the school would contribute to the overall development of her daughter, saying, "I want her to develop at the same rate as other children."

Most of the participants acknowledged the importance of parental involvement in their children's education. While some mothers confirmed they could help with homework, others felt that they could not play such a supporting role. Mia said she helped with her daughter's homework: "Homework in primary level is easier and I check the school agenda to keep track of the homework." Other mothers indicated that they could not help

with homework. First, Joanne shared the following anecdote: “Last night, my youngest comes with math problems. I said: It’s been several years since I have not seen these, so I do not understand what you’re doing.” Rita also tried to help her child academically, but admitted to feeling unable to because she did not have the tools necessary to properly carry out this responsibility. Besides, when she was younger, Rita did not like school; therefore, it was difficult to get involved in that kind of support on a regular basis with any kind of passion. Instead, she felt sadness: “When my child asks me to help with homework, I’m sad because I cannot help him.”

Although mothers described their relationships with schools as complex, some of the parents were proactive and identified different strategies that would improve their school relationship and support their children’s educational success. They believed, among other things, that having a computer at home, access to after-school tutors, and the opportunity to educate themselves constituted measures to help with their children’s homework. Janic said, “My daughter would like to have a computer at home...so she can have the chance to do her homework.” For Rita, the need for after-school tutors was real and substantial, “After-school programs would help my children be more successful.” From a personal perspective, Joanne said, “I need to educate myself more so I can better supervise my children,” while Mia said, “[I would like] to better manage my time so I can have more time to help my children” on an academic level. In their view, such resources and actions would promote the development of their parenting skills and encourage them to participate more actively in their children’s school life.

Theme 3 – Relationship with their Children’s School

Despite their precarious situation (financially and academically), many of the participants created positive relationships with their children’s school, showed an interest in their education, and, in some cases, got actively involved in school activities, such as parent–teacher meetings. Most mothers agreed that teachers were supportive of their single-parent status and concerns, and tried to assist them with their basic needs. Joanne expressed it this way, “School staff will often provide lunch and even breakfast for my children to ensure that they are well fed.” Most mothers said that teachers communicated with them on a regular basis to ensure their children’s educational success.

However, a few mothers felt that the school did not communicate often enough with them, and that teachers sometimes blamed them for their children's difficulties. To illustrate this point, Agathe acknowledged that "there is a lack of communication between the family and the school... A month ago, I went to meet with the teacher...she said... 'Since the beginning of the school year, your son is not doing very well in French'... I would have liked it if the school would have communicated with me beforehand."

In this regard, Jeanne found that "the teachers could build a better rapport with the parents." Several participants mentioned that not all the teachers were empathetic toward single mothers. For example, Jeanne stated that "they only communicate with parents to convey negative things. I know what they think of single mothers." Joanne was frustrated with the school because "the teachers do not understand what is going on with my son, it is haunting me."

Some of the single mothers reported that they attended parent-teacher meetings in various degrees of frequency, and for different reasons. For those who attended often, these meetings allowed them to understand their children's academic progress. As Mia affirmed, "The teacher listens and tries to find ways to enhance the academic success of my children." According to Anise, "It is reassuring to see the things they do in the classroom even though I do not always understand the information they give me at the meetings... it helps to know what I can work on with my daughter." Similarly, Joanne felt that the teacher could identify the strengths and the weaknesses of her child. She said, "Teachers can detect more clearly the difficulties... It is important to meet often to ensure the academic success of children." Janic, who regularly attended parent-teacher meetings, felt that they were unnecessary, as her children progressed well in school. The real help came from the teacher's assistant and the occupational therapist who worked with her and her daughter so they could both receive regular, at-school follow-ups. Their advice enabled Janic to better support her child academically on many levels: "The occupational therapist suggested websites, ways of helping my daughter learn to read."

Theme 4 – Parental Role in Enhancing Language Acquisition and Building Cultural Identity

Regarding their parental role in their children's language acquisition and cultural identity at home, most participants said they did not have the skills necessary to transmit the

French language and culture to their children. Although many mothers found it easy to communicate in French, some admitted that their difficulty in expressing themselves in their mother tongue led to a lack of confidence, although they did their best to communicate in French every day. This language difficulty had a detrimental effect on their capacity to help their children with their homework (which was in French). Rita lamented, "I cannot help my child with homework because I have a lot of difficulty reading the guidelines in French." Jeanne also felt unable to help her child academically because of this gap: "Last night my youngest arrives with his homework, I said, I do not understand the instructions because they are written in French." In fact, some mothers said that they did not always have the resources to encourage their children to speak their mother tongue. According to Mia, "I do not always have the educational tools needed to help my child with his French... I do my best for the moment." Rita made a suggestion in this regard: "There should be parenting programs to assist parents to better educate our children in a francophone environment."

Some mothers recognized the importance of the French language in their children's lives. Agathe admitted that "it is important that our children speak French or they will lose their native language but it's hard in an almost completely anglophone environment." Anise commented that she gets upset when her children speak in English, but agreed that it was difficult for them as "most people in the community speak English." However, for Mia and Pauline, speaking French at home and in the community was not important. In this regard, Mia found it important to have skills in both languages and said, "Today, you cannot evolve and speak one language."

Some mothers said they enrolled their children in French-based extracurricular activities. Joanne said, "My children are enrolled in various programs of the Boys and Girls Club. They offer services in French, which is advantageous for them." Mia acknowledged the importance of French at an early age: "There are francophone daycare services in schools so young children can live in French." Some participants, however, did not seem to care at all about the spoken language when it came to childcare. On this matter, Pauline said, "I don't have any concern about my children attending English-speaking childcare," and another participant agreed, clearly describing her reality, "My children are enrolled in English-language daycare. Services in French are not available in our community... I do not mind."

Discussion

In this phenomenological study, we wanted to understand poor single mothers' relationships with their children's school, the educational achievement of their children attending francophone schools in New Brunswick, and any impact on the children's language and cultural identities. Our findings demonstrated four areas of concern, which are now compared and contrasted with previous research.

First, as per Theme 1: Parenting and Financial Difficulties, as heads of households with few resources, all of the participants confirmed that it was very stressful to make ends meet. Many single-parent families in New Brunswick, including our participants, receive \$966 per month in welfare (GNB, 2013). Although there was a \$21 per month increase on October 1, 2013, we believe that the amount is still insufficient to cover the basic needs of single mothers and their children. According to the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice (NBCFSJ, 2012), increased welfare benefits do not allow families to eat healthier in a context where the price of food continues to rise. With the rising cost of food and housing in New Brunswick, many single-parent families live in a precarious financial situation, exacerbated by a lack of financial acumen. Most mothers acknowledged the importance of establishing a budget, but admitted they did not have the knowledge to do so. They said they wanted to become independent financially so they can meet their children's needs. In many parts of New Brunswick, long-term educational programs on budget management exist, but it is questionable if single mothers can find the time and the means to participate in these activities. Cities and municipalities in New Brunswick should provide affordable means of public transport to facilitate their travels, and childcare so they participate in intervention programs in their community.

In a report titled "Our Action Plan to Be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick," the Government of New Brunswick (GNB, 2007) pledged to make the strategic investments required to ensure that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn, particularly to assist single-parent women living in poverty, who have limited financial resources and therefore cannot meet their own basic needs, let alone their children's. Ironically, the following year, the very same government cut all the home economist positions in the Ministry of Family and Community Services. These professionals covered all regions in the province, visiting families living in deep poverty to guide them with budget management and other well-being skill sets. Cutting these positions was an incredibly short-sighted

political decision, contrary to the earlier commitment to help families be self-sufficient. When working with families, Professional Home Economists (PHEc) analyze the overall family life and work with families to develop an intervention plan to aid them in reaching a certain level of self-sufficiency, including money management and childcare (More & Asay, 2012; Pendergast, McGregor, & Turkki, 2012). Reinstating these positions would better ensure the financial well-being of families, particularly New Brunswick single-parent mothers and their children.

Second, previous studies have shown that when women must ensure their survival and that of their children, it is difficult for them to participate in school life (Coleman, 2013; Jensen, 2012; Ward & Bélanger, 2015). However, a survey on the situation and the needs of single mothers on welfare acknowledged that they have strengths that should not be neglected nor undermined (SORIF, 2012). With appropriate education and training, these mothers could improve their self-confidence and become engaged in creating a home environment conducive to learning (Gaudet, 2008). Single mothers mentioned that their children's well-being and education were important despite the mothers' precarious situation. Most participants felt overwhelmed by school expectations and their responsibilities, made worse because they would like their children to succeed in school, and in life. Other studies also found that female heads of poor single-parent families were not equipped to support and help their children achieve success in school nor to be involved in homework assistance (Jensen, 2012; Savoie & Gaudet, 2010).

Given their own precarious living conditions, these mothers believed education would improve their children's lives (i.e., break the cycle). This realization can certainly explain, at least in part, their sense of confidence in the school environment for their children's future and their subsequent efforts to maintain a positive relationship with schools and teachers. They said they did their best to get involved in their children's education, similar to Epstein's (2011) and Paquin and Drolet's (2007) findings that single mothers attached great importance to the educational success of their children and tried to participate as much as possible. Nonetheless, some participants in our study said they did not always have the skills and capabilities to achieve this goal (e.g., help with homework).

These findings raise four key issues of whether New Brunswick has sufficient resources to support single francophone mothers in guiding their children to become achievers in francophone educational settings couched in the dominant anglophone context. First, knowing that the New Brunswick school system has a dual mandate (i.e.,

teaching and providing opportunities for building a francophone and Acadian identity), we wondered if enough attention is being given to the challenges that single-parent mothers face when ensuring their children's educational achievement. We believe that if these women had access to life and financial management specialists, such as home economists or financial counsellors, they could better succeed in overcoming their fear and timidity in dealing with the school.

Second, mothers admitted that the continued support and encouragement of teachers had contributed to their increased attendance at parent-teacher meetings. Some said they attended these meetings to receive information on their children's educational progress and to create a climate of trust with teachers and school administrators. These findings concur with other studies that concluded that most parents, especially single mothers from disadvantaged communities, have a positive view of school and participate regularly (DeBlois & Lamothe, 2005; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2003; Kanouté, 2003; Paquin & Papillon, 1997). Some participants acknowledged that teachers influenced their motivation to participate in their children's school life, also confirmed in other studies (Epstein, 2011; Leblanc, 2009; Paquin & Drolet, 2007; SORIF, 2012). In our study, it is fair to say that mothers perceived the relationship between school and parents as easier and more positive when schools and teachers maintained significant contact with parents in francophone towns.

A third area of concern was that many participants found it difficult to transmit their culture and language to their children. The WEBNB (2012) and the NBACSW (2010) claimed that poor language skills contributed to mothers' difficulties in this parental role. The family once played a key role in ensuring that both linguistic and cultural heritages are passed on to the next generation, but this is currently much more difficult to achieve (Landry et al., 2010; Leblanc, 2009). Despite its mandate, the New Brunswick school system cannot be fully responsible for transmitting the French language and culture. Consequently, as primary socialization agents for their children, francophone parents must take on this role, despite the difficulty single-parent mothers face when assuming the role of guardians of the French language and culture. Aside from poor French-language skills, contributing factors are the challenges of living in francophone-minority communities, and not appreciating the importance of establishing themselves as francophone.

Fourth, despite the lack of French-language resources in some of the participants' communities, some mothers found and enrolled their children in French-language extracurricular activities or used other means to enrich their children's learning. Other participants did not seem concerned about the availability of francophone childcare in their community. It is possible that, because they were in survival mode, many did not understand the importance of exposing their children to a variety of learning experiences in French during preschool years. This might explain why these families did not contribute fully to the development and affirmation of their children's francophone identity and cultural heritage.

All things considered, to ensure greater success for francophone children, more can be done so single mothers can become aware of, and act on, their role in minority communities, even before their children reach school age (Duguay, 2008; Leblanc, 2009; Masny, 2001). In addition, single mothers in francophone-minority communities should receive better services for early childhood to better prepare their children for school, and help them and their children have a better command of the French language and francophone identity development (Cormier, 2005; Duguay, 2008; Leblanc, 2009). In sum, providing these mothers with the necessary resources is important in order to encourage them to create an environment conducive to the development of a francophone identity and a sense of belonging to the community, while actively participating in the school life of their children (GNB, 2009; Landry, 2003; Landry et al., 2010; Leblanc, 2009).

Conclusions

The New Brunswick government needs to take action to better ensure that low-income, female-headed, single-parent francophone families have more control and influence over their children's educational achievement in conjunction with ensuring and enriching their francophone cultural identity. These parents should be provided with intervention services pursuant to the government's (a) mandate to ensure that the education system teaches and provides opportunities for building a francophone identity and (b) its pledge to make certain that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn, particularly for single-parent women living in poverty, with limited financial resources.

Recommended actions include, first, long-term parental, at-home support for single francophone mothers from Professional Home Economists (which requires the government to reinstate their positions within the Ministry of Family and Community Services). With PHEc support, these women could learn to (a) live creatively and effectively within a limited income, (b) support their children academically in concert with French-language and cultural-identity intervention programs, (c) understand the importance of choosing early childhood care and activities in French so as to pass on the language and enrich cultural identity. Indeed, New Brunswick commissioner Gino Leblanc (2009) assigned this responsibility to francophone parents, intimating they would need support in this role.

Second, in lieu of this policy decision happening in the near future, the authors, working closely province-wide with francophone elementary schools, and drawing on Epstein's (1987) theory about how to organize programs of family and community involvement as essential components of district leadership and school improvement, intend to develop and provide parenting skills programs to promote reconciliation between single francophone mothers and the school environment. These educational programs will strive to support single mothers in the exercise of their educational role with their children to guarantee the latter's long-term educational success. Overall, mothers should greatly benefit from these resources that would help them support their children while in school.

Finally, it is anticipated that our research will contribute to knowledge advancement and inspire other researchers to reflect further on this topic and research problem. To that end, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study in order to identify family and social factors that influence the schooling of francophone children in single-parent, female-headed families, from primary to secondary level. This study did not focus on this dynamic, looking instead at each mother's relationship with teachers and the school.

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