PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL IN A DOUBLE MINORITY CONTEXT: THE CASE OF RACIAL FRANCOPHONES

by

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Abstract

This study explored the involvement in school of racial Francophones in a large city in Canada. Specifically, the study investigated the involvement of Black francophone parents in two of Ontario’s publicly funded elementary schools. This study was guided by one main research question: How are Black francophone parents of African origin involved in their children’s formal education in the French-language schools? Five sub-questions stem from the main research question: How do Black francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in school? What strategies do these parents employ to become involved in their children’s formal education? What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s formal education? What inhibits or facilitates the participation of these parents in the school? How is the double-minoritized positioning of these parents implicated in their participation and strategies?

Using an anti-racist lens, the study revealed that Black francophone parents of African origin hold differing views regarding involvement in their children’s education. Although these parents treasure education and strive to instill personal values in their children, they express their understanding of involvement in school primarily in terms of cumulative negative experiences they have experienced and in some cases continue to experience with the French-language schools. Understanding of parents’ involvement in school was also encapsulated in terms of the
parents’ own schooling experiences. For many, what constitutes involvement in school challenges the discursive meaning given to parental involvement in educational institutions, governments, and by mainstream parents.

This study indicated that the extent to which Black francophone parents are involved in school and their strategies for involvement are rather poor. Moreover, the study singled out racism as one of the primary deterrents for Black francophone parents’ involvement in school. Other uncommon but significant barriers to parents’ involvement in school included: the impact of role inversion in the family; parents’ unawareness of the importance of their role in the education of their children; the blind-spot approach of parents to schooling; the absence of spirituality in parents’ lives; and the laissez-faire attitude of families rearing children.
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To the participants in this dissertation, I deeply and sincerely extend my gratitude for your willingness to share with me your feelings regarding not only the involvement of minority
parents in French-language schools but also some of your intimate stories as an immigrant to Canada. My heart goes out to those of you who continue to be marginalized and discriminated against within the French-language schools.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my children,

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You make my life meaningful.
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Chapter One:
The Problem

There is no topic on education on which there is a greater agreement than the need for parent involvement. Teachers and administrators want to know how to work with families in positive ways. Families want to know if their schools are providing high-quality education, how to help their children do their best, and how to communicate and support teachers (Epstein, Sanders, Salinas, Jansorn, & Voorhis, 2002).

Disadvantaged parents in general have a strong desire to be involved in their children schooling (Moles, 1993).

Parents have divine obligations vis-à-vis their offspring, that these obligations require them to pass onto their children not only their knowledge, but also to participate in the ways in which knowledge is transmitted to them (Teaching of an African elder).

Introduction

Parental involvement in school, a multi-dimensional construct (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Wandersman et al., 2002), is widely recognized and even promoted as a means to maximize children’s potential (Edwards & Alldred, 2000; Epstein, 2002; Feuerstein, 2000). There is an expectation that parents must support and play a critical responsibility in the promotion of their own children’s school achievements. Attempts to enhance parental involvement in school occupy governments, educators and parents’ organizations across North America and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. The Government of Ontario, for example, holds that the degree of parental participation will eventually become an indicator of schools’ success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).
For some, parental responsibilities pertaining to education must not be limited solely to helping children with their schoolwork. Instead, parents’ responsibilities also need to be extended to the broader domain of school improvement and the democratization of school governance (Fullan, 1982). Studies indicate that parental involvement in school, particularly in urban settings, is extensive (Chavkin & Gonzales, 1995; Dei et al., 2000; Ellis, 1999; Shaw, 1998). Yet, racial minority parents seem reluctant to become involved in their children’s school (Dei et al., 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Parhar, 2006). These minority parents continue to be perceived (especially by teachers and school administrators) as uninterested in their children’s schooling (Parhar, 2006) or are labelled as uneducated and too poor to afford effective involvement strategies. McCollum (1996) argued that school personnel have criticized minority parents for not volunteering in school fund-raising activities, attending school council meetings, and attending parent-teacher meetings. Lightfoot (2004) contends that parents of low-income of minority status or with children who have been labelled at risk, need to become more involved in their children’s schooling. In response to these criticisms and evidence, numerous studies have investigated the reasons why visible minority parents have, as some educators describe, failed to become involved in their children’s schooling.

For example, in the case of Ontario’s French-language schools, these schools are, and continue to be increasingly diverse and populated with children from ethnic and racial minority parents. Some schools in urban areas even credit their existence to the enrolment of immigrant children (Gabikini, 2005). Yet, the Black Francophones’ concerns regarding their children’s education are overlooked in schools’ teaching, administrative, and advisory structures (see Mujawamariya, 1998, 2002). While Black children are disproportionately over-represented in
some schools, their parents continue to be disproportionately under-represented, or even absent, in the same institutions.

In light of changing demographics in French-language schools in Ontario, especially in urban schools, it is critical that educators in these institutions begin to understand and take into account the cultural views and make up of their schools’ diverse populations. It is equally important for all parents to participate in their children’s schooling because their involvement can enhance their children’s chance for success, in and after school. However, notwithstanding calls for parental involvement in school and the benefits that parents and children can derive from an effective involvement in schools, the relationship of racial francophone parents of African origin and the French language schools in Ontario remains uneven. For this reason, this introduction chapter sets the stage for the problem I will be exploring, the aim of which is to examine in an in-depth fashion how francophone parents from Sub-Saharan Africa participate in their children’s education in two publicly funded French language schools in a large multicultural city in Canada.

The two schools involved in this study have been selected primarily because of their diverse student population and the fact that they are home of most of the Black francophone children whose parents choose public French language education when they arrive in Ontario. As the researcher, I am aware that not all Black francophone parents send their children to publicly funded French-language schools. There are parents who choose, for religious and other personal reasons, to have their children schooled in public French language Catholic schools or in an English-speaking school. Parents, who choose to send their children to French-language Catholic schools and those who prefer to have their children educated in an English-speaking school,
make significant socio-economic contributions to French-language schools, institutions and cultures in Ontario. However, they are not the focus of this dissertation.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I give the background of the study through a personal story. Next, I describe the problem and the purpose of my research. Then, I highlight the significance of the study as well as the theoretical underpinning and conceptual framework that I use. Lastly, I define several terms used throughout this study. Some of these terms are used unchangeably.

**A Brief Personal Story**

Reflecting on the legacy of colonialism and his many years of military services in the French National Army, an elderly legionary from my Guinean village once said, “…[L]isten my son, education is what will liberate us, but it cannot be acquired in seclusion.” (Translated from the dialect Malinké or Maninkakan, which is a widely spoken language throughout West Africa, namely in Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Ghana.) These well thought-out words did not mean much to me, then, as I did not record their full meaning. However, they kept reverberating in my mind, and as I grew up, I began to make sense of the deep meaning of the elder’s words. Education, indeed, is and will continue to be a salvation for humanity, and especially for under-privileged and marginalized people.

My thinking on the nexus of education and salvation for humanity became unmistakable when I decided to pursue higher education in one of Canada’s leading universities, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. As a Ph.D. candidate and father when I moved to Ontario in the early 1990s, I was enthralled to discover a vibrant linguistic
minority Francophone community, which served, then, as a focal point for new francophone immigrants living in Ontario. I participated in several Franco-Ontarian and Caribbean community activities, and even joined the umbrella Franco-Ontarian organization, l’Association franco-Ontarienne de l’Ontario (ACFO). This organization’s main objective was, then, to promote the development of Franco-Ontarians in the areas of culture, economy, employment, communications, health, community and social services, recreation, religious and human values, education, legal and constitutional issues, and politics. ACFO liaised, though marginally, with other local francophone groups whose mandate included helping newcomers from francophone countries integrate into the dominant society. During my years of involvement in the Franco-Ontarian’s mainstream community in the 1990s, there was evidence that this community and its educational institutions needed to be more inclusive; issues of concern for minority parents were, in my view, trivialized or relegated to the background. The education of children of minority parents was one such issue, which was brought to the table on several occasions. In spite of repeated requests from minority parents to have a representative from ACFO advocate, on their behalf, for a more inclusive Franco-Ontarian educational system, no significant progress, if any, was made while I was involved this Franco-Ontarian’s mainstream organization. I left the ACFO disenchanted and disillusioned about the betterment of schooling conditions for children of ethnic minority background within publicly funded Franco-Ontarian schools.

Therefore, I argue that this study germinated from the ashes of my thwarted attempts and unrealized dreams, during the many years I spent advocating for a more inclusive school system. Furthermore, I take the position that actions and attitudes toward the concerns and treatment of ethnic minorities in French-language schools reflect those of the White Franco-Ontarian’s society. I also posit that despite their minority majority status in some schools in Ontario’s urban
cities, the treatment of ethnic minority Francophones in schools and in society leads to their further marginalization within the Franco-Ontarian society.

I come to this study as an employee of the Provincial’s Ministry of Education and a longtime community advocate for fairness and equity in the education system. As such, I am neither indifferent to the social, economic and educational challenges facing Black francophone parents, nor unbiased about the myriad of inconclusive policy initiatives undertaken by the government regarding parental involvement in Ontario’s schools over the years. Nonetheless, in this study, I have committed to shed light only on what the study’s participants say about this topic. Keeping that in mind, I highlight the purpose of this research.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between racial minority Francophones (specifically Black francophone parents of Sub-Saharan Africa) and two publicly funded elementary French-language schools in Ontario. This research will be guided by one key question: How are Black francophone parents of African origin involved in their children’s formal education within the French-language schools? Five sub-questions stem from the main research question:

1. How do Black francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in school?

2. What strategies do these parents employ to become involved in their children’s formal education?
3. What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s formal education?

4. What inhibits or facilitates the participation of these parents in school?

5. How is the double-minoritized positioning of these parents implicated in the strategies they employ, their degree of participation, and the inhibitors and facilitators they experience?

**Significance of the Study**

Understanding the significance of this research requires a brief but necessary historical overview of the immigration pattern of Black Francophones in Ontario. Unlike the well-documented history of Black Anglophones in Canada and Ontario (see Cooper, 2000, 2003) and whose settlement in this country can be traced back to the 16th century (Case, 2002; Cooper, 2001), the history of Black Francophones in Canada and Ontario is less researched and, therefore, unknown to most Canadians. The immigration patterns of continental Black Francophones in Canada and Ontario is even less known.

Earlier Black Francophones in Canada were “Haitians” from the Caribbean Island of the Republic of Haiti. They started arriving in large numbers in Canada in late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Haitians are significant represented in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, they are not the focus of this research. Unlike the Haitians, immigrant Black Francophones from Africa started arriving in Canada in a noticeable way in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They immigrated (and continue to immigrate) to Canada directly from the African continent. These Black immigrants come from countries that continue to maintain economic and political ties with their former colonizer, France. Although the extent to which these ties are developed and
maintained vary from one country to another, Black francophone immigrants from former France’s colonies arrive in Canada either on a voluntary basis or are involuntary immigrants. While voluntary immigrants often choose to immigrate for educational, family reunification, or economic reasons, involuntary immigrants mostly leave their country because of various reasons including, but not limited to wars, inter-ethnic conflicts, or political persecutions. Countries such as Somalia, Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, Togo, and Mali are the main countries of Black francophone immigrants of African origin in Canada.

Like the early Haitian immigrants, these immigrants settled at first in the province of Quebec and specifically on the Island of Montreal. Over time, though, Black Francophones from the Sub-Sahara started to migrate to other provinces. According to Madibbo (2004), migration of Black Francophones to Ontario started in the 1980s. Many reasons explain why Black Francophones of African origin in Quebec and those who arrive from other countries choose Ontario. These reasons are linked to issues of race, language, economy, and politics. Political discourses after the failed referendum in 1995 has accelerated the migration of many Black Francophones from Quebec to Ontario. Since the failed 1995 referendum in Quebec where Jacques Parizeau, former Premier Minister of Quebec, blamed the loss of the referendum *par l’argent puis des votes ethniques* i.e., on money and ethnic votes, many Black Francophones and other immigrants became convinced that there was no place for them in Quebec society.

Today, because of the information about Canada available to the would-be immigrants through the Internet and other electronic media, many Black francophone new immigrants come directly to Ontario from their country of origin. Ontario Francophones, who are members of a racial minority group, are concentrated mainly in the Greater Toronto Area, Ottawa, Hamilton,
and Sudbury. Given that most Black francophone immigrants in Ontario are less fluent in English, they tend to gravitate to French-language educational and community institutions such as l’Association culturelle franco-ontarien (ACFO), and the Centre Médico Social et Communautaire (Bouchard, 2002; Quell, 1998). These institutions are generally the first places in which socialization of new immigrant families occurs. They also provide the new immigrants an entry point into the employment market and a better understanding of how to navigate some of the social and public services offered at different levels of government. It is through the aforementioned institutions that many new Black francophone immigrants come to be aware of their own linguistic identity in the White Franco-Ontarian society. The majority of new immigrant families choose to send their children to a French-language school because of linguistic barriers and the cultural attachment they perceive toward the French-language. In these contexts, it is worth asking the question: How significant is the number of Black francophone immigrants in Ontario?

Demographic statistics of 2005 released by the Office of francophone Affairs (OFA) indicate that the number of ethnic and racial Francophones in Ontario continues to increase steadily. Of the 548,940 Francophones identified in Ontario, about 10.7% are members of a Francophone racial minority group and close to three-quarters (74.3%) of those racial minority Francophones are born in another country (OFA, 2005). Racial minority Francophones mostly come from three regions: Africa (31.5%), Asia (30.5%), and the Middle East (18.0%). In urban centres such as Toronto and Ottawa, one francophone out of three is a member of a racial francophone minority (OFA, 2005).

Based on these demographic realities, I can argue, that ethnic minority Francophones in general and Ontario’s Black Francophones in particular, affect significantly the demographics of
French-language institutions including schools. Without minority children, the French-language school system would have suffered from lack of students because of the assimilation of White Francophones into the Anglophone majority, and the low birth rates of Franco-Ontarians. Therefore, this study is significant for several reasons:

First, given the dearth of literature about Canadian Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s education, the knowledge produced by this study will fill the gap of the lack of research in this area. This will allow the scientific / scholarly community to have a better understanding of the challenges facing a doubly racialized and marginalized parent group of Africa. This study will also show how Black francophone parents are perceived and treated in mainstream French-language educational schools.

Second, the research will shed some light on the socio-economic and political marginalization of those in Ontario’s French-language schools who make up a significant proportion of Ontario Francophone society. Black Francophones of African origin have contributed and continue to contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of the Francophone community in Ontario. Black Francophones from Africa are taxpayers who have a stake in the education outcomes of their children. Therefore, it is simply a matter of social justice (Ryan, 2002), that these Francophones are fully supported and encouraged to become involved in their children’s education, like the mainstream parents. This is particularly relevant because the relationship between parents and the school is assumed to reflect the democratic values of the society in which we live. Thus, schools must live up to the true meaning of social justice, equity, and fairness, and therefore all parents must be encouraged to have a say about the values and cultural knowledge that are taught to their children.
Third, by drawing on accounts of parents, educators, and community leaders, this research can provide much-needed direction for scholars and policy makers in developing and implementing targeted and planned interventions that take into account Black francophone parents and other educational stakeholders. In other words, information to be generated from this study can be used to help French-language schools’ leaders better understand racial minorities’ involvement in schools and their overall relationship with the school. This study will suggest ways to overcome some of the obstacles parents and children face in the education system so that they feel welcome in the schools.

Fourth, as I mentioned earlier, racial and ethnic minorities in general and Ontario’s Black Francophones in particular affect significantly the demographics of French-language schools in Ontario. Children of Black Francophones have made possible the continued existence of a number of schools, especially in large cities. Without children from racial minority families, the French-language school system would have suffered for lack of students due to the assimilation of White Francophones into the Anglophone majority. Thus, this study will be significant by suggesting ways to overcome barriers to Black francophone parents involvement in their children’s education.

The significance of this study can also be understood by recognizing that, in Ontario, Black Francophones of African origin are racial and linguistic minorities that continue to experience specific challenges within another linguistic minority that has constitutional protection under the Canadian Constitution and the Charter of Rights.
Theoretical Underpinning

Fetterman (1989) pointed out that theory is a guide to practice and that no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model. Hence, I tapped into more than one theoretical lens in examining the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education in two publicly funded French-language schools: cultural capital, anti-racism, social capital. While I expand on these theories, I borrow the metaphor of “protectorate” when it comes to exploring the involvement of Black francophone parents or double minority Francophones of African origin in their children’s education. According to Pushor (2001), the term protectorate refers to a colonialist structure in which those with strength (the colonizers) take charge in order to protect those without strength (the colonized). When you translate this concept to the school context, it can be argued that schools operate as a closed system with little space for children and parents who are considered different. This metaphor is a good entry point for understanding the theoretical lens that I used in this study, because Black francophone parents in Ontario live in a double minority situation, and are perceived in discourses and public arenas as protected by, and within, the official linguistic Franco-Ontarian minority.

A myriad of theories have been put forth to help us either understand or explain parental involvement in school, including the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977); theory of cultural capital and student achievement (Lareau, 1987); theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988); and theory of working class neighbourhoods (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1997, p. 30) defined cultural capital as:

the capital goods transmitted by the different family pedagogic actions, whose value qua cultural capital varies with the distance between the cultural arbitrary imposed by the dominant pedagogic action and the cultural arbitrary inculcated by the family pedagogic action within the different groups of classes.
Schools represent and reproduce middle and upper class values and forms of communications, because teachers come from predominantly middle or upper class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu, teachers are able to communicate effectively with parents from middle and upper class who share similar beliefs with them but have difficulty relating to parents who come from a different cultural frame of reference or habitus. Borrowing from Bourdieu, Lareau (1987) contended that upper middle-class parents are more likely to become involved in school activities, that working-class parents are more likely to embrace a supportive but less involved role, and that teachers who are from the upper middle-class are generally more likely to give better evaluations of students if their parents are involved in the school. Coleman (1988, as cited in Feuerstein, 2000) similarly argued that all schools have social structures that influence student achievement. However, some schools have stronger relationships with families than other schools do and are therefore able to promote higher levels of achievement. Social networks, in Coleman’s words, are a resource available to all parents and students. I argue that such an assertion cannot be generalized because not all immigrant parents have access to similar social networks. Bowles and Gintis (1976) have also rationalized low propensities for participatory forms of parents in schools when they argued that schools in working class neighbourhoods tend to be regimented and controlled by the administration. As a result, these parents have fewer propensities for participatory forms with schools.

Although these theories provide a useful framework for our understanding of various types of parental involvement in school, they are not specific to Black francophone parents who live in a double minority context. In other words, parental involvement in children’s education of a racial minority group such as Black Francophones of African origin cannot be theorized in isolation from the social effects of race that members of this group are subjected to daily.
Therefore, analysis of Black Francophones’ experience as immigrants facing racism and language discrimination and as a double minority will allow a better understanding of the relationship between French-language education system and Francophones of African origin. For this reason, this study uses an anti-racist lens. Anti-racism is a theoretical and a political project that aims for social change and calls for a critical examination of:

The study of how dynamics of social difference (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, language and religion) are mediated in people’s daily experiences. (Dei, 1996, p. 55)

The anti-racism theoretical stance recognizes that children do not go to school as “disembodied” generic youths; therefore, as Dei (1993) put it, educators need to understand how the schooling process and learning outcomes affect and are affected by their racial, class, gender, and disabilities identities. The anti-racism stance helps to understand the concerns and everyday struggles to have parents’ voice heard. Moreover, the framework recognizes the need for an education that is more inclusive and capable of responding to minority concerns about public schooling. Since Black Francophones are, to borrow from Bourdieu (1993), “excluded from within” the Franco-Ontarian society, the use of an anti-racism theoretical lens allows a better understanding of the processes of schooling in French-language schools in Ontario. In addition, this framework promotes the interrogation of the role of the French-language’s education system in fostering race-based inequities in schools.

The use of an anti-racist framework is important because the framework questions the marginalization of certain voices, and is appropriate to examine the involvement or lack of involvement of Black francophone parents who are visible only in their marginal confinement in French-language schools. As Dei (1993) points out, the anti-racism framework also calls for putting power relations at the centre of the discourse on race and social difference. This is
particularly relevant since racial minorities commonly believe that those in leadership positions in French-language schools cannot accept the idea of sharing power with those who are traditionally marginalized within these schools. Institutional power is used to marginalize and delegitimize further the knowledge and experiences of those who do not claim this country as their birthplace. To speak about power is to speak about social construction of knowledge and what has come to be defined as valid knowledge, and how such knowledge and its associated power are used to negate and devalue the experiences of Black Francophone parents within the school system. Knowledge (social, cultural) that Black Francophone families and their children bring to school can only enrich the French-language education system. It is, therefore, relevant to my study, to examine how it inter-locks with anti-racism framework.

**Conceptual Framework**

I understand “conceptual framework” as a map that gives coherence to a study. Put differently, it is a sort of a map-like theory that connects all aspects of a study (e.g., problem definition, purpose, literature review, methodology, and so on). In coming up with a conceptual framework, I needed to remind myself first that parental involvement / engagement, a multi-facetted construct, is often used to describe a wide range of activities and initiatives that parents take in relation to children’s schooling.

While generally accepted as being desirable, parents’ involvement is, as I mentioned in the preceding section, often presented metaphorically in the literature. Lightfoot (2004) uses the metaphors “full / empty,” “lacking / having,” “those who give [information] and those who receive” to describe parental involvement in urban schools. According to Chen (2001), most studies on parental involvement in schools use an indicator of involvement that is dichotomous; for example, participate versus does not participate.
Some authors describe home-school relations in terms of power relations between the school and home. Lareau (1987, 2000), for example, argues that the term parental involvement, as used by schools, implies middle-class cultural capital in a way that implicitly defines lower income parents as deficient when they do not meet the schools’ expectations. This characterization of parents creates an ideal type of parent that is linked to both race and class. Fine (1993) described ways in which the “common values” constructed by schools support the cultures of some families while systematically excluding others. Kutz (1998) referred explicitly to a contrast between resources and deficit surroundings of parents. As an immigrant parent myself, my understanding of parental involvement stems from that put forward by Kauffman, Perry, and Prentiss (2001): “Diverse activities occurring either at home or at school to allow parents [and extended family members] to share in their child’s education” (p. 2). Simply put, I take the view that the involvement of minority parents in their children’s education, in general, and Black Francophones in particular, should be accompanied by actions or initiatives aimed at supporting or encouraging parents with their children’s schooling in and outside the home.

As these multi-faceted definitions show, there is no uniform operational definition of parental involvement in the literature. As a result, there is no uniformity in conceptualizing parents’ involvement in the school. Some teachers and school administrators have conceptualized involvement in school narrowly; that is, measuring involvement in terms of parents-teachers meetings and other formal school meetings, or underestimating this involvement when it originates from working class and non-traditional families (see Yap & Enoki, 1995).

In this section, I conceptualize the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education by first drawing attention to the need to differentiate between the concepts of schooling and education. Although these two terms are used interchangeably throughout this
research, for some Black francophone parents and scholars they convey, justifiably, different meanings. Education entails the learning of values, norms, skills, knowledge, and rules needed to live together with others in a common world (Peter, 1973). Hare and Portelli (1996, p. 81) argue that, “at a general level, education is concerned with learning that which is considered valuable.” The concept of schooling, on the other hand, connotes a “process of learning and management of socially approved knowledge, involving an approved curriculum and pedagogy, paid professional educators, compulsory attendance of pupils, and school grouping” (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 1998).

In this research, I use the terms “schooling” and “education” to refer to all forms of learning and teaching, including activities, which take place beyond the confines of school’s boundaries that is at home. With that in mind, for my conceptual framework I have borrowed from Epstein’s (2002) concept of influencing spheres, which take into account the influence of the home, the school, and the community on the child’s success. Although Epstein’s conceptual approach has been criticized for being based on a small number of successful school, family and community partnerships (De Carvalho, 2001), it involves educational stakeholders that play a critical role in today’s education. Key concepts in my conceptual framework, which is depicted in Figure 1, include the following elements: understanding involvement, involvement strategies, facilitators / inhibitors factors, depth of involvement, and parents’ double minority status. I have described each of the components.
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.
Before delving into the framework’s components, it is worth defining first what the terms school, home and community mean. For the purpose of this research, school refers to a place of primary instruction that encourages children to learn under the supervision of teachers; a place for acquiring knowledge. Home refers to a place where an individual or a family lives. If it is easy to define the terms “school” and “home,” the term “community” is much more difficult to delineate. Some define community as both a place and state of fellowship or relationship (Keyes & Gregg, 2001); others are more specific in their definition. Henderson and Mapp (2002) use the term to refer to the following:

1. the neighborhood or the places around the school;
2. local residents, who live in the area and may or may not have children in the school, but have an interest in the school;
3. local groups that are based in the neighborhood. (p. 10)

In this study, I used the term community to refer to a structure of support mechanisms that include the personal responsibility for the collective and reciprocally, the collective concern for individual existence. The role of community leaders in the support mechanism of Black francophone parents is what I hope will be highlighted in the study’s findings. For Black francophone parents, community is perceived as the place where the forming of the heart and face of the individual is most fully expressed. Social interactions and leadership within communities allow individuals to discover all there is to discover about themselves.

In this framework, the child is located at the centre of the three spheres in which he / she learns and grows; communication and cooperation between home, school and the community are necessary for every child’s success. If the child feels cared for and encouraged to work hard by
the school, home and the community, he/she is more likely to do his/her best to learn and to remain in school. I will now turn to each of the key concepts I have utilized in this research.

The first component used in conceptualizing the involvement of Black francophone parents of African origin is the understanding these parents have of the term “involvement” in their children’s education. This is particularly important because parents’ decision to maintain a relationship with their children’s school and to support their children’s education is usually contingent on their understanding of what is expected of them. How Black parents of African origin understand the term involvement in school is also important because the meaning that the term carries in their country of origin may play a role in how they understand their role in their children’s schooling in Canada. For instance, in an article entitled, “What Community Participation in Schooling Means: Insights from Southern Ethiopia,” Swift-Morgan (2006) argued that for native populations, what is characterized as parental/community participation can be a monetary payment or in-kind contribution rather than involvement in decision making or teaching and learning. Monetary payment is one of the first ways parents and, sometimes, other community members contribute to their children’s schooling. In fact, although formal education in public primary grades in most French-speaking African countries is officially free, in reality the government usually covers only teachers’ salaries. In order to pay for some school supplies or improve the school’s infrastructure, parents make in-kind contributions in the form of providing labour, materials, or food to nourish the labourers. In short, for Black francophone parents, understanding involvement in school should allow the parents to experience a paradigm shift in terms of how educational institutions ought to be perceived. At the same time, it presents parents with the opportunity to know and identify strategies of involvement.
It is not only critical that parents understand what it means to be involved in their children’s education, but also it is important that they know what strategies of involvement will promote their children’s learning. Epstein (2002) has grouped strategies of parental involvement in children’s education into six types: parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making, and collaborating with community. Briefly these strategies are:

**Type 1. Parenting.** Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level.

**Type 2. Communicating.** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress with school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

**Type 3. Volunteering.** Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

**Type 4. Learning at Home.** Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities and decisions.

**Type 5. Decision Making.** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through Parent-Teacher Associations, committees, councils, and other parent organizations.

**Type 6. Collaborating with the Community.** Coordinate the work and resources of community businesses, agencies, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.
For Black francophone parents, in general, adopting one or more of these strategies can benefit children in their learning. This leads me to the third concept I used in the framework.

The third concept of the framework relates to what facilitates or inhibits minority parents from becoming involved in their children’s education. Facilitator and inhibitor factors to involvement can be directly or indirectly related to various causes including, but not limited to economic factors (Deslandes, 2004; Peña, 2000; Robinson, 2007); demographic (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Trotman, 2001), and psychological (Dei, 1993; Tardif & Lessard, 1999). Impediments to involvement in schoolchildren’s education can often lead educators to make erroneous conclusions about parents. For instance, some educators may interpret parents’ lack of involvement in school activities as the proof that these parents do not care about their children’s schooling. In reality, this may not be the case, because contrary to popular belief, low-income parents and single parents are just as interested in their children’s education as any parent from any other economic class (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Ogbu, 1992). As Trotman (2001) argued, “Educators must realize that the family life is very busy and many parents prioritize quality time with their family differently. They may not have the time to embark on suggestions that place further time constraints on them “(p. 280).

The depth of parental involvement is the fourth element of the framework. It reflects the extent to which parents effectively participate in their children’s schooling. For the purpose of this study, it refers to the time spent in one-on-one interaction with a child; parents’ formal and informal contacts with educators; parents’ influence on teachers and other school administrators; and the time parents spend in school activities. Teachers often have strong opinions about what constitutes depth of parental involvement in school. Some teachers believe that they can be effective only if they obtain parental assistance with learning activities at home (Marsiglio,
Others believe that their professional status will be jeopardized if parents are involved in activities that are typically the teacher’s purview (Barnard, 2004).

The fifth and last concept that I used in this study pertains to the notion of “double minority status” of Black francophone parents. Black francophone parents are identified by their skin colour and linguistic minority status. These elements are significant markers within the Franco-Ontarian society. The history of Black francophone parents in Ontario and their lived experiences are intertwined. Therefore, in conceptualizing their relationship with French-language schools in Ontario, it is crucial that the racial and socio-economic backgrounds of Black francophone parents be taken into account in the process. It is only then that these parents’ involvement (or lack of it) in their children’s education can be fully understood.

**Definition of Terms**

Black francophone parents of African origin refer to immigrant Francophones from Sub-Saharan Africa who live in Ontario and who have chosen to have their children attend one of the French-language schools.

**Double Minority Francophones:** In this study, the term “double minority” Francophones refers to Black Francophones of African origin who live within another linguistic official minority group, the Native French Canadians from Ontario. Black Francophones of African origin are mostly immigrants from the former French / Belgian colonies. The French language is not their mother tongue, nor the first language spoken and used at home; instead, it is the official language used for formal education and administration in their country of origin. I used the term “double minority” Francophones interchangeably with Francophones of African origin to highlight, among others, two major obstacles that these Francophones must deal with in
Ontario: skin colour and language. Black Francophones of African origin have no constitutional rights or protection.

**Other immigrant Francophones** stand for those French-speaking people who have migrated to Canada and whose origins are the Caribbean, Europe, North Africa, Mauritius Island, and Asia.

**Native French Canadians from Ontario, Franco-Ontarians, Franco-Ontariens de Souche:** These terms designate White Francophones who are born in Ontario and who claim official linguistic minority rights under the *Canadian Constitution*. The term “Franco-Ontarian” is commonly used in formal educational circles, and by the public. However, according to Quell (1998), it is highly contested by Black Francophones and others (e.g., Francophones from Western Europe) who view the designation as privileging one linguistic minority over another. I am fully aware that some people may take issue with all of these distinctions, because some groups and individuals may consider themselves to belong to more than one of the aforementioned groups. These terms have the value only of a heuristic device of which my years of working in various community associations of Francophone groups has made me aware.

In June 2009, the Government of Ontario introduced a new provincial definition of the term “Francophone,” in light of the declining birth rates of native French Canadians from Ontario, increase in immigration, and the reality of more families with only one parent who speaks French. The new definition is known as an inclusive definition of Francophone (IDF). Although the new IDF now includes those whose mother tongue is French as well as people whose mother tongue is neither French nor English (Allophones) but who speak French at home, it does not give new rights to those who can now be considered as belonging to the francophone population. In fact, the IDF does not have an impact on the individual level, but on the
community level, since it modifies the statistical profile of the Francophone community in Ontario.

**Francophonie:** The term “Francophonie” refers to the united group of nations in which French is a first, official, or culturally significant language.

**Minority** refers to any group that is disadvantaged, underprivileged, excluded, discriminated against, or exploited.

**Parent** refers to any adult family member, guardian, or fictive kin sharing in the responsibility of rearing the child. The term includes mother, father, grandparents, and other members of the extended family.

**Thesis Organization**

This study consists of seven chapters, a bibliography, and appendices. Chapter One introduces the study and explains what drew me to this research. It also outlines the research’s purpose and significance, and describes the theoretical lens and conceptual framework that delineate this study. The chapter concludes with definitions of terms used throughout this research. Chapter Two presents what the literature says about parental involvement. Chapter Three provides a detailed account of the methodological approach I took in conducting this study, including what research design I used and how I collected and analyzed interview data. Chapter Three also describes the ethical considerations and limitations of this research study. Chapters Four and Five present my findings. Specifically, Chapter Four highlights the research participants’ understanding of the term “involvement in school,” strategies they employ and the extent to which they are involved in their children’s education. Chapter Five underscores what participants perceive as obstacles to racialized minority parents’ involvement in their children’s
education. A discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven contains the conclusion and recommendations of the study.
Chapter Two: 
Literature Review

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on parents’ involvement in their children’s education. In all the research, the evidence is consistent and unequivocal: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and throughout life (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Epstein, 2002, 2004; Edwards, 1995, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lighfoot, 1978; Sadoski & Willson, 2006; Schmidt, 2005). The research continues to grow and build an ever-strengthening case for an effective and productive schooling for all students when parents and community members are involved in school. Yet parents’ involvement in school tends to be like an extension of middle-class institutions operating as an organic extension of middle-class families (Laureau, 1999, 2000), or as Hurtig (2008) argues, involvement in school often places adults (usually mothers) in subservient roles rather than encouraging them to be decision makers and leaders (p. 207, as cited in Hurtig, 2008). With that in mind, this review of the literature is developed along three lines that have informed my thinking on this study: first, I give an overview of parental involvement in school with a focus on racial minority parents and barriers that influence these parents’ involvement. Next, I provide an overview of policies undertaken by the provincial Ministry of Education regarding the involvement of parents in Ontario’s schools. In the last part of this chapter, I highlight what we know from research on involvement of Black francophone parents in Ontario’s French-language schools.

Involvement of Racial Minority Parents in Their Children’s Education

As I mentioned earlier, my focus in this literature review is primarily on Black francophone parents and, by extension, on minority parents. Why minority parents and not all
parents? It is because it is often presumed that members of these groups are not involved and, by
de facto, not interested in their children’ schooling (Basit, 1995; Beresford & Hardie, 1996;
Holden et al., 1996) and that they are “hard to reach,” “impenetrable,” and uninterested in the
outcome of their children’s schooling (Crozier, 2001; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Parhar, 2000). It
is also because minority parents are generally perceived as not “good” parents (Crozier, 2001),
hard to motivate to become involved in school policy matters (Denessen et al., 2007), too lazy,
incompetent, or preoccupied to participate in school programs (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).
While these attributes may find resonance in some settings, the evidence is clear: school policies
on minority parents’ involvement in their children’s education neither encourage nor meet
parents’ expectations in terms of having an equitable role in democratic participation in school.
School’s attitudes towards minority parents are explained from different angles including that
which locates the source of educational problems with deficiencies in family practices and
attitudes. Using in-depth interviews to study how teachers perceived the role of African-
American parents in the elementary school setting, Lightfoot (1978) found that despite African-
American parents’ pleas for empowerment, teachers refused to collaborate with them about their
children’s education. As a result, the author concluded that middle-class White teachers did not
want to have positive relationships with low-income Black parents. Similarly, Ogbu (1977)
interviewed and observed Black American parents and found that role construction was difficult
for them due to school policies and procedures, such as racial stratification, low teacher
expectations, and negative teacher-parent relationship. These parents believed that the inequality
of opportunities caused Black children to fail. Ogbu (1977) concluded that low-income Black
children believed that education was not a vehicle to social mobility and opportunity. In a similar
vein, Kauffman et al. (2001) argue that schools do not always know what parental involvement
really means and if they do, they always target their efforts in the wrong direction (p. 6).

According to them, this is partly because schools do not have the work force to do things that would be effective in reaching second language learner parents. Huss-Keeler’s (1997) year-long ethnographic research project in a British, multiethnic primary school investigated the influence of teachers’ perceptions of Pakistani ESL parent involvement, and interest in their children’s education, on teachers’ expectations of Pakistani ESL children’s language and literacy achievement. The author found that Pakistani English as a Second Language parents were very interested in their children’s academic performance, but that their interest was demonstrated in a culturally different way than White middle-class parents. Teachers, however, interpreted this difference as a lack of interest. As such, Pakistani ESL children’s learning and achievement abilities were often underestimated.

Some scholars have often identified different approaches that schools use for minority parents’ involvement. For example, in a study on home-school relationship for Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents, Crozier (2007) found that schools have a very general expectation of parental involvement, and that they adopt, in Dale’s (1996) term, two main school involvement approaches: the traditional expert model or the transplant model. In the expert model, Crozier argues, “the professional (the teacher) is the expert, as in a doctor-patient relationship whereby the professional holds the valued (in this case educational) knowledge and uses her / his position to make all decisions about educational matters” (p. 300). In the transplant model, “the professional transplants their skills and expertise to the parents to help them become more competent and skilled to participate in the role of co-educators” (p. 300). In this way, parents are seen as resource (Dale, 1996, p. 3). Both of these types locate the balance of power within the
hands of the professionals, and at best only allow parents to support them in ways based on their decisions.

Research carried out by Kaufman et al. (2001) regarding reasons for and solutions to lack of involvement of parents of second language learners (who are mostly minority parents) identified four categories of parental involvement. The first category identifies parents who participate in school activities in addition to communicating with the teacher. The second category of Kauffman et al.’s typology consists of parents who are not “joiner” but who care about their children and take comfort in the educator coming into their home or sending notes to parents about school activities. The last two categories include abusive parents who are involved in school’s activities on the surface, and parents who are neither supportive nor actively involved in their children’s education. For Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling consists of three types of participation: school, cognitive-intellectual, and personal. School involvement refers to parental participation in activities at school and at home, such as attending school activities and helping with the child’s homework. Cognitive-intellectual involvement refers to exposing the child to intellectually stimulating activities, such as reading with the child. Personal involvement includes knowing about what is going on with the child at school, such as knowing what the child is currently working on in school.

Literature on involvement of minority parents in school also reveals that many factors predict the lack of involvement of these parents. In a large-scale study of economically disadvantaged parents living in an urban setting, Dauber and Epstein (1993) surveyed over 2,300 parents to determine predictors of school involvement. They assessed characteristics of the parents (e.g., education, employment), child (e.g., grade in school), and school (e.g., school practices to involve parents) to determine the most important predictors of school involvement.
They found that parent level of education was positively related to school involvement and child grade level was negatively related to school involvement. Overstreet et al. (2005) also examined predictors in parental involvement within African American families in public housing. They found that several predictors were related to school involvement. These predictors include church attendance, perceptions of school receptivity, participation at the community center, and educational aspirations for parent and child (p. 106). Overstreet et al. (2005) contended that parents’ education level was positively related to level of employment, and parent’s aspirations for self were positively related to church attendance and perceptions of school receptivity. Furthermore, this study revealed that, “Parents who were active in [their] community center had higher educational aspirations for their children, more positive perceptions of school receptiveness to parental involvement, and were more likely to be involved in their children’s schooling.” Overstreet’s study was consistent with that of Dauber and Epstein (1993) in that in both studies parents’ report of school receptivity was the most powerful predictor of school involvement for economically disadvantaged African Americans. That is, the degree to which parents felt that the school listened to and was welcoming significantly predicted their level of school involvement.

Drummond and Stipek (2004) explored ethnic comparisons in parents’ beliefs regarding their role in particular aspects of their children’s education, including homework completion, knowledge of student learning, and the subjects of math and reading. A total of 234 low-income parents living in both rural and urban communities and consisting of approximately 84 African American and other ethnicities (Latino and Asian parents) were included in the study. In comparing the involvement of ethnic parents in their children’s education, the authors found that low-income parents generally believed that they did not need to assist with homework when their
children were doing well in school or if they felt that their children knew more about the subject of reading and math than they did. They concluded that parents’ beliefs regarding their ability to influence their children’s education decrease as their children progress in the grades. This may be explained by parents’ belief in their inability to help children improve on their already successful performance.

Investigating parental involvement solely from the parent’s perspective, Smrekar and Cohen Vogel (2001) suggested that, “How [low income African-American] parents perceive their role in their children’s schooling may be a function of how the school’s organization treats them” (p. 76). Smrekar and Cohen Vogel argued that low-income African-Americans believe in a separation between home and school responsibility for their children’s education. In other words, these parents believed that they were responsible for providing their children moral education while teachers provided academic learning. In the same vein, Thompson’s (2003) article, No parent left behind: Strengthening ties between educators and African American parents / guardians, indicated six school-related problems that were of concern to at least 25% of the parents and guardians who participated in the study: the school district’s racial climate; inadequate math curricula and instructional practices; unfair disciplinary practices; difficulties with writing among African-American students; and reading and reading-rate problems among African-American students. Thompson’s study, which used a mixed-method study, involving 129 African-American parents / guardians from 11 school districts in Southern California, suggested that addressing these six concerns is a good point of departure from which to begin improving the relationship between schools and African-American parents / guardians.

McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) explored social class and racial differences in parents’ school involvement and, further, examined involved parents’ intentions concerning school. Their
findings revealed that highly involved parents in school tended to be White, upper-middle-class mothers. These authors argued that this happened, in part, because involved mothers frequently acted in ways that excluded other mothers, particularly African Americans. Involved mothers pressed administrators for additional tracking. This was a strategy for separating their children from lower status children and positioning their children for higher education.

This section of the literature review would be incomplete without a highlight of some school-based as well as home-based obstacles that prevent racial minority parents from becoming involved in their children’s education. Bermudez and Marquez (1996) argue that judgmental attitudes of the school towards immigrant families lead many parents to become disengaged in school. These attitudes combined with educators’ pre-conceived perceptions that minority parents are already faced with immense life problems, and the fact that many educators are reluctant to initiate and maintain meaningful contact with minority parents explain, in Bermudez and Marquez’s view, the inability of minority parents to participate in schools. Others (Bernhard et al., 1999; Dyson, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000; Shaw, 1998) have added barriers including but not limited to parents’ past negative school experiences, unfamiliarity with computer technology, school system’s operating norms (e.g., time, jargon), and the inability of parents to participate in conversations.

In examining the involvement of Mexican American parents in their children’s education, Peña (2000) argues that Mexican American parents do not become involved in school because they view the school as alien with an impersonal environment directed by those who are insensitive to minority parents’ language and culture. The author concludes by arguing that educators’ perceptions about parents not being “savvy” enough to assume meaningful role in schools, and the fact that many minority parents consider educating students as solely the
responsibility of teachers explain the non-involvement in school of Mexican American parents. Jones (2003) confirmed Peña’s findings, arguing that teachers’ beliefs about Hispanics in general could be negating their ability to expect a lot from the children of these parents (p. 95). Taylor and Whittaker (2003) suggest that poor attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards minority parents negatively affect teachers’ efforts to involve these parents, thereby further contributing to the marginalization of minority parents. For example, teachers often demand that minority parents adopt the linguistic rules of the “dominant group if they are to support their children’s academic learning effectively, while often doing little to ensure that this can happen” (Blackledge, 2000).

Similarly, Ladky’s (2007) survey on principals and teachers’ practices and challenges in fostering new immigrant parent involvement, found that the “low levels of new immigrant parent involvement indicate failures in building bridges between parents’ new and native cultures.” (p. 893). Li’s (2003) counter-narratives of a Chinese Canadian family also show that cultural discontinuities (Ogbu, 1992) and incongruence between families’ pre-conceived conceptions of the school were barriers to involvement. Li (2003) reminds us that some Chinese families see the school as “the place for knowledge and discipline, where children could not only become better students and be transformed from being ignorant to being learned, but also could be introduced to a package of school rules and expectations” (p. 195).

Multiple barriers were also found to curtail Caribbean immigrant families' school involvement in the United States (see Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). According to Mitchell and Bryan (2007), some parents have experienced educational failure themselves and do not want to relive that. The work of Wright et al. (2000), Gillborn and Youdell (2000) also suggest African-Caribbean parents stay away from the school because they are frequently ignored when trying to
intervene in their children’s behalf. Some parents do not believe that teachers have their children's best interests at heart (Beresford & Hardie, 1996; Peña, 2000; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). Others perceive themselves to be different (see Lareau & Horwart, 1999) from their children's teachers or unsure of what they have to offer in terms of their children's formal education, or feel disempowered by the traditional bureaucracy operating in most school systems (Peña, 2000).

Barriers to involvement of minority parents are not all limited to parents’ perspectives. Critical multicultural and anti-racism education scholars argue that discriminatory, particularly racist, school policies and practices deny minority parents equal opportunity to participate in schooling. This argument is echoed in Dei (1993), who argues that schools are dominated by White power, privilege, and knowledge that makes teachers reproduce hierarchies of power and exclusion through their practice. Therefore, it is not surprising that few minority parents are involved in schools. Lareau and Horwart (1999) report that Black parents are deeply concerned about the historical legacy of discrimination against their children in schooling and because of this, they are prepared to question the school’s practices. In the same vein, Denessen et al. (2007), of the Netherlands investigated multi-ethnic schools’ parental involvement policies and practices, and found that school administrators recognize difficulties in getting immigrant parents involved in their children’s school for various reasons including these three: language problems, cultural differences between the schools and families, and colour-blind attitudes regarding discriminations. According to Denessen et al. (2007), instead of creating conditions for minority parents’ involvement in school, many schools hold parents responsible for their own involvement, and expect parents to comply with the schools’ expectations and culture.
Minority parents’ disengagement from school is been found to be related to other aspects of school structure, including the lack of inclusion. In examining 35 school principals, Ryan (2002) argues that administrators’ limited knowledge of their school communities constitutes an obstacle to parents’ involvement in the school system. The term inclusion here goes beyond the traditional bake sales, cultural events, parents’ nights and the like. School inclusion is particularly relevant when children’s home and community’s cultures differ from the culture of the school. In many instances, parents have little control over the content, organization and delivery of the curriculum, and they have little choice but to accept what schools and school systems have prescribed for their children (Ryan, 2002). Parents have had to deal with institutions that were foreign to them, and children have had to cope with subject matters that were often outside the realm of their experience. Unfortunately, both parents and children have not always been successful at overcoming these barriers. Parents tended to stay away from schools and students struggled with the curriculum and a variety of other school practices. Inclusive school policies and practices are designed to prevent these very situations.

In light of the wave of school reforms in Ontario and elsewhere, inclusion of marginalized groups is important in that reformers and non-reformers alike recognize the harm that past and present exclusionary practices have done to these groups. Such practices were, and in some cases continue to be, both blatant and subtle. Bureaucracy in school, especially when it comes to including marginalized parents in their children’s schooling is an obstacle in that empowerment of these parents is always trivialized in the school system. As Lewis and Nkawaga (1995, as cited in Ryan, 2002) suggest, schools by their very nature seek to retain power for themselves, and in the process exclude already powerless parents, particularly those who are poor and those who belong to particular ethnic (racial) groups.
Kim (2004) and Dyson (2001) find that a deficit ideology held by teachers often affects efforts to communicate with minority parents who do not speak the language of the dominant group. Teachers consider the problem of involvement as situated with language deficient minority parents. Instead of admitting that family-school interactions are controlled by highly defined, socially constructed scripts that institutionalize the relationships among parents, teachers, and school administrators, blame is often laid on minority parents for failure to become involved in schooling of their children. Related to teacher ideology, the research literature further reveals that schoolteachers judge minority parents’ degree of engagement with the school according to White middle-class standards and practices. This “one-size-fits all” approach presumes that minority parents have specific and similar viewpoints, resources, and availability to help with schoolwork (Leistyna, 2002; McCollum, 1996). Hamby (1992) adds that many school personnel perceive minority parents as being uneducated and poor, thereby presuming parents will be uninvolved in their children’s school. Hamby further reports that the lack of training for teachers about how to involve parents in schools and teachers’ perceived insecurity in involving parents hinders the participation of minority parents in schools. Similarly, Wolfendale (1992) finds that many teachers fear that parents in the school and classroom will undermine their professionalism and that parents’ views will clash with their views. Likewise, Dei et al. (2000) state that teachers who hold a “protection perspective” fail to encourage minority parental participation because teachers view themselves and schools as having the primary responsibility for educating children. Teachers believe that their work “must be protected against unwarranted intrusions from parents, community workers, and social activists” (p. 5). In a more general critique, McCaleb (1994) argues that it is the actual underlying mindset, goals, and assumptions of public schooling that hinder minority parental participation in school.
In other words, the school is considered the authority, and power in this authority resides with professionals who are not encouraged to consider parents as people who have something meaningful to say about their children’s education.

Collignon and Tan (2001) examined barriers that Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese families in a New England state, are confronted with when it comes to participating in their children’s education. They identified these barriers: insufficient knowledge of the educational system in the United States among Southeast Asian community members; a lack of attention to issues of language proficiency and cultural competency in service provision to members of the Southeast Asian communities; and low expectations of the Southeast Asian community members. Bernhard and Freire’s (1999) study, What is my child learning at elementary school? Culturally contested issues between teachers and Latin American families also explored the perspectives of Latin American children and their families regarding parental involvement in school. Findings of the study revealed barriers including issues in communication, which involved teachers' use of educational terms that the parents did not understand. Teachers' positively slanted reports of the children's progress were not understood as indicating the genuine weakness of the child's performance. Ineffective family support in helping children improve their grades, and the fact that children and parents expected a more personal approach from the teachers.

_Provincial Government’s Policies and Practices Regarding Parental Involvement in Schools_

In a policy document entitled Ontario Excellence for All – Developing Partners in Education, it is stated: “The Ministry of Education appreciates that the needs and contributions of parents have been undervalued and the education system needs to create several new points of reinforcement in order for the ‘parent factor’ to realize its potential” (Ministry of Education,
Despite good intentions to create conditions for parents’ involvement in school over the past several years, the government policy regarding parental involvement is unfocussed and unsupportive of the involvement of minority parents in their children’s education. The government has been ineffective in providing minority parents with vehicles and resources that can bring a shift from the current home, school and community relationship to a full support for racial minority parents’ involvement in their children’s school life.

The ineffectiveness of government’s policy parental involvement in school became evident in the early 1990s when the Ministry of Education passed legislation to establish the Ontario Parent Council (OPC) in 1993. The role of the twenty member parents’ Council was, according to the Ministry, “to foster relationship between school boards and parents and to promote parental involvement in education.” In other words, the Ontario Parent Council was to advise the Minister of Education on key educational issues that may have a direct influence on parents. Although this parent council was operated until 2004 as an arm's-length advisory body to the Minister, its membership was not reflective of Ontario public schools’ population. The Council’s membership was homogenous because it had only one White francophone representation and no racial minority parents or Black francophone parents. The sole White francophone person in the Council was from the Parents partenaires en éducation (PPE). The Parents partenaires en éducation claims to speak for all French-speaking parents, but is in reality a Franco-Ontarian-run provincial organization that has superseded a couple of other Franco-Ontarian parent organizations over the past 20 years. PPE’s strategies are mainly oriented towards issues of recruiting and retaining students in French language schools, growing awareness in the Franco Ontarian identity, and the integration of bilingual (exogamous) families. The representative of the Parents partenaires en éducation on the Ontario Parent Council did not
and could not speak in the name of racial and ethnic minority parents in the school system. That council member could not and did not address any of the concerns relevant to Black francophone parents.

Through the Ontario Parent Council, the government formally took steps to address the lack of parental involvement in the school system. This recognition of parental role in education was concurrently undertaken with the work of the Royal Commission on Learning, which recommended in its 1995 report, *For the Love of Learning*, that “each school in Ontario establish a school-community council” (p. 27). The Royal Commission on Learning also recommended that members of each new school-community council be drawn from the following sectors: parents, students, teachers, and representatives from local religious and ethnic communities. Further to the Royal Commission on Learning’s report, the Ministry of Education issued *Policy and Program Memorandum 112* that mandated school councils in Ontario publicly funded schools. Unlike the Ontario Parent Council, the mandate of the new school councils was not to be advisory; instead, the school council’s role was (and still is, at least on the surface) to strengthen partnerships involving parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community. Specifically, the Ministry wanted the involvement platform of parents in school councils as a way to improving student achievement and enhancing the accountability of the education system to parents. However, like the Ontario Parent Council, school councils failed to meet the challenge and expectations of minority parents including Black francophone parents in French-language schools (see Heller et al., 1997). This shortcoming of the government regarding the involvement of racial minority parents in French-language schools was evidenced in the Education Improvement Commission’s 1997 report, *The Road Ahead - III: A Report on the Role of School Councils*. According to the report, “most parents wanted their
school councils to remain advisory bodies, but felt that their advice was not always considered. Therefore, parents wanted to have meaningful input and the ability to influence decisions that would affect their children and their local schools”

Subsequently, the lack of a tangible and measurable support of Government policies regarding parental involvement in school was reflected in Ontario Regulation 612/00 released by the then Minister of Education, the Honourable Janet Ecker. Although Regulation 612/00 confirmed and clarified the advisory role of school councils and clearly established the right for school councils to express their views on any issues deemed important to them, the regulation did not empower parents or make the schools more welcoming to them. The Regulation simply required that “school boards and principals solicit views from school councils and report back to school councils on any advice received; and school boards and school principals across the province consult with and respond to their school councils in a consistent manner” (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Despite the many attempts highlighted to involve parents in a meaningful manner in their children’s education, the Ministry’s efforts and strategy are still open to questions some of which the Ministry tried to answer when it undertook, in 2005, A Parent Voice in Education Project (PVEP). The Parent Voice in Education Project aimed at providing the Minister with advice and recommendations on the implementation of a Parent Involvement Policy in the Ministry. Initiatives carried out under this project led, indeed, to the development of a Parent Involvement Policy and the establishment of a non-arm’s length Parent Engagement Office. Both the Policy and the Office strive to be a more inclusive representation of parents by providing school boards with an annual grant to support school council-led initiatives, and to enhance the participation of parents who face challenges in getting involved in their child's education. In addition, the Policy
pinpointed the need to alleviate challenges related to parental involvement in school, including settlement of new immigrants in Ontario, teaching English / French as a second language, socio-economic difficulties, physical challenges and other logistical challenges. Specifically, the Policy set these goals:

- To make it easier for all parents to participate in their child's education
- To help create a more welcoming school environment for parents
- To provide the supports for more parental participation to enhance student achievement

In addition to providing annual grants to support parental involvement, the new involvement policy gave direction for the Minister of Education, the Ministry, school boards, schools and their staff, as well as parents, to create conditions and supports for parents to engage in their child's education. However, by providing this grant to schools, the Ministry of Education implicitly recognizes that a significant number of parents are in fact at the margin of the school system and that those parents deserve to be encouraged and supported to become involved in their children’s education. Although schools are free to apply for the annual grant to support parental involvement, the funding raises more questions than answers. For example, questions to be asked with the grant should be: is it enough to make a dent in parental involvement in school? What schools are more likely to apply for this grant? In addition, why is this funding not used to target primarily those who have been traditionally marginalized in the education system?

It is noteworthy to mention here that like with previous Ministry’s initiatives on parental involvement, the *Parent Voice in Education Project* recognized that the Ministry failed its inclusiveness test for members of parents in school councils, as it recommended that board
members on future Ministry’s parent structure “should have experience working with a wide range of school and community groups.”

**Involvement of Black Francophone Parents in Ontario’s Public French-Language Schools**

This section reviews the literature pertaining to the involvement of Black francophone parents in Ontario’s publicly funded French-language schools. To my knowledge, there is no documented literature that critically examines the involvement of Black francophone parents in Ontario French language schools. Research on parental involvement in Ontario’s French-language schools have been mainly confined to an examination of the relationship between these schools and the White Francophones (see Bélanger & Wilson, 2000; Haché et al., 1998; Heller et al., 1997; Larie et al., 2000).

According to Bernard (1998) and Thériault (1999), involvement of minority parents in Franco-Ontarian’s schools is minimal, and parents who participate in these schools are mostly representatives of the Franco-Ontarian community. Heller et al. (1997) who studied three French-language district school boards reached a similar conclusion. Heller et al. concluded that parents in French-language schools’ councils are mostly Franco-Ontariens de souche or native French Canadians from Ontario. Barriers to the representation of ethnic francophone parents in French-language schools are, in Heller et al.’s view, rooted in the fact that French is the language of communication in school councils in these schools. This, in Heller et al.’s view, limits the participation of parents who are not fluent in French and therefore, cannot be conversant during council’s meetings. Although Heller et al.’s study fails to elaborate on other types of barriers that racial francophone parents face, this research, nonetheless, underscores the fact that French-language schools do not strive to have racial minority parents become involved in school. This,
in my opinion, signifies that the school system practices a systemic, yet subtle, racial
discrimination, which translates into a minority representation deficit across the school board.

Other studies (Bélanger & Wilson, 2000; Haché et al., 1998) come to conclusions similar
to those of Heller et al. (1997). Bélanger and Wilson’s (2000) study on transition of students with
special needs from elementary to secondary level reveals that some of the barriers to parents’
involvement in French-language schools include new arrivals of immigrant families and
language skills. These conclusions are also open to questions in that they do not pinpoint the root
cause of why new immigrant parents do not become involved in their children’s schools.

Similarly, Labrie et al.’s (2000) study entitled “Who Mute” was silent on the barriers that prevent
the involvement of racial francophone parents in Ontario’s French language schools. Instead,
Labrie et al.’s study focuses on White francophone parents only and concludes that there is
minimal parental involvement of those parents as well. Unlike Heller et al. (1997) and Bélanger
et Wilson (2000), minimal involvement of racial francophone parents in French language schools
can be attributed to other factors, which will be highlighted in the findings chapters of this
research. The focus of this research confirms the lack of studies on the involvement of Black
francophone parents in French-language schools.

My understanding of the major claims in this review of the literature is summarized in
Table 1.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of review</th>
<th>Major claims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial minorities</td>
<td>• Widespread negative perception toward racial minority parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of positive relationships between racial minority parents and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>middle class teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Approaches to school involvement focused on exclusionary models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Schools’ efforts to enhance involvement of racial minority parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are directed in the wrong direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government’s policies</td>
<td>• Unfocussed and ineffective policy of involvement of racial minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parents in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Francophones</td>
<td>• Highly involved parents are upper-middle-class White Franco-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ontarians, not Black parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Judgmental attitudes of the school lead to disengagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

As the literature surveyed in this chapter revealed, parental involvement is an important factor in enhancing children’s academic achievement and their success later in life (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Edwards, 1995, 2005; Epstein, 2002, 2004; Sadoski & Willson, 2006; Schmidt, 2005). Yet, one is struck by the scarcity of literature on some racial minority parents such as the Black francophone parents in Ontario and the lack of mutual understanding between the school and one of its key stakeholders, the parents. For many racial minority parents, issues of involvement in their children’s education can be difficult because they view schools as staffed overwhelmingly with White teachers and administrators who tend to discourage and undervalue what they have to offer. Teachers, especially those of the dominant
group, also tend to hold the pre-conceived idea that racial minority parents are not good parents or may not have the predisposition to be involved in the school. Many White teachers hold a deficit ideology, which hampers them from communicating effectively with minority parents in their school.

In Ontario, despite Black francophone parents’ aspirations and ambitions for their children, there is still no effective government policy or support structure for them. Successive government’s attempts for effective parental involvement in Ontario’s schools have failed. This literature review has revealed that educational policies regarding parental involvement in school in Ontario over the years continue to remain elusive in spite of the evidence that school involvement of parents is in theory, at least, a critical element of government’s strategic commitments for achieving public confidence in education.

There are multiple obstacles to Black francophone parents’ willingness and availability to become involved in school. Case in point: In the Ministry of Education’s *Aménagement linguistique policy*, a blueprint for francophone schools, it is stated that, “Francophone parents will continue to be involved in the implementation of the *Aménagement linguistique policy*, a major commitment to make French-language schools the cultural hubs of their communities.” (p. 19) This means, implicitly, that these schools do not know their communities or if they do, they do not engage and support them to become fully involved in their children’s education.

Despite the multi-faceted nature of parental involvement in school and barriers associated with involvement of Black francophone parents within the French-language schools, I hope that this study will reveal some of the shortcomings in these areas by examining first hand how Black francophone parents understand the term involvement in school and how they perceive barriers that hamper their involvement as well. Moreover, I anticipate this study to build upon the scant
examination of minority parents’ involvement in Ontario’s French-language schools and suggest ways not only to overcome barriers to parental involvement in school, but also to recommend steps that key stakeholders could take to help children achieve success in school.
Chapter Three:
Methodology

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I reviewed what the literature says about the involvement of parents in school. In particular, I paid close attention to the involvement of minority parents in their children’s school. In this chapter, I describe the methodological approach that I took in conducting this study, which sets out to examine the involvement of Black francophone parents in two publicly funded French language schools. The chapter is organized as follows: I begin this methodological approach by describing the French-language school board in which the two schools are located. Next, I explain the research design and then I describe the research sample, procedure, interview approach, and data collection and analysis. Before describing this research’s limitations, I highlight some ethical considerations that governed my access to the participants.

The Conseil scolaire de district du Centre Sud-Ouest: A Profile in Brief

The two French-language public elementary schools that are the focus of this research are part of the Conseil scolaire de district du Centre Sud-Ouest (CSDCSO, 2009), the largest French-language district school board in Ontario. The board is over 68,000 square kilometers that is, more than twice the size of Belgium. It spans from Windsor in the west to Trenton in the east, and from the Niagara region in the south to Algonquin Park in the north. According to CSDCSO’s public statement, the educational vision of the board is based on the principles of inclusion, respect and personal development.
In school year 2007–2008, the board was home for over 7,000 students distributed in 35 schools (with five more new schools projected by end of school year 2009–2010) in which over 84 languages were spoken. There were 5,755 elementary students and 1,509 students at the secondary level. Although the exact number of Black francophone students in the board was (and is still) unknown due to Ministry’s policies, non-White students are disproportionally over-represented in the board’s urban schools. According to off-the-record conversation with school officials I spoke to while conducting this study, the majority of Black children are from families of African origin. In school year 2007–2008, 371 students were enrolled in one of the schools while 301 were in the other school. According to unofficial verbal accounts of school personnel, over 70% and 65% of each the two school’s population were of ethnic minority backgrounds. In stark contrast, there was only one Black teacher in one of the schools and the other school had two Black teachers, one of whom had been hired only a year ago at the time I conducted my data collection. With this overview of the board, I now highlight the research design.

**Research Design**

I utilized in this research a qualitative methodology in the form of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews to obtain the perceptions of Black francophone parents regarding involvement in their children’s education in a large multicultural Canadian city. In the beginning, my overarching goal was to obtain information that was outside the realm of my own understanding and knowledge about the community I belong. In doing so, I needed to use an approach that would make participants comfortable, open-minded, trustworthy in their accounts on the subject matter, and willing to bring up educational concerns that they consider important, rather than to merely respond to my questions. Thus, qualitative research is appropriate as it provides “thick descriptions” that are vivid, nested in real context, and have a ring of truth that
has strong impact on the reader (Mile & Huberman, 1994). A qualitative approach is appropriate in dealing with potentially multiple realities, mutually shaping influences, and value patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, with its emphasis on people’s “lived experiences,” this research approach is well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives: their “perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions” (Van Manen, 1977, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994) and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them.

**Sample**

The purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam, 2001) utilized in this design serves two objectives. First, it allowed the researcher to select an information-rich case for study, which led to a better understanding of how one of the leading French-language public boards that expresses the human, moral, and democratic values of Canadian society (Ministry of Education, 2005) supports and encourages Black francophone parents to become involved in school. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). The second objective was to help the researcher understand parental involvement in school from the standpoint of those who share similar racial backgrounds, even though they do not necessarily share the same ethnic, social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Third, this strategy allowed the researcher to better understand how schools in one of the largest French language district school boards perceive parental involvement of Black francophone parents in the largest multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city in Canada.
Participants

Participants in this qualitative study consisted of 15 people: 8 parents, 4 teachers, and 3 community leaders. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time and without any penalties. Each of the participating group is described.

Parents.

The eight parents who participated in this study were selected on an equitable basis that is, four men and four women. There were four parents per school. At the time of my data collection, all but two of the participating parents had at least one child attending one of the schools involved in the study. The two parents with no child in either one of the schools had two kids each who attended at one time or another the French-language public school system, but these kids have since moved into an Anglophone school. I purposely chose this type of sampling in order to gain insights that would allow me to contrast the experiences of parents whose children are currently attending the schools with those whose children are no longer enrolled in the French-language school system. This comparison was particularly interesting in that it showed, as highlighted in Chapter 5, that some Black francophone parents choose to have their children transferred into the English language school out of frustrations rooted in school’s discriminatory treatment toward them.

Since this study was mainly focused on the involvement of Black francophone parents of African origin in their children's formal education within two French-language schools, I ensured that these parents were all from Sub-Saharan Africa. I also made certain that only the following information pertaining to each parents was collected: geographical region of the country of origin, number of children in both elementary and secondary French language schools, and
length of stay in Canada. Although most of the parents were willing to share with the researcher a great deal of more personal data, because of their level of comfort, I resisted to the temptation to collect more data than necessary.

Table 2 highlights the portrait of the parents who participated in the study. I used pseudonyms for each participating parent in conformity with the consent letter signed by parents. As the chart shows, the eight Black parents were from different geographical region of Africa, different ethnic backgrounds, and different community groups. The French-language was the only language of communication that they share in common prior to immigrating. Since common language and common border do not equate to common culture, I can argue that these parents most likely shared also different life experiences. Participating parents have been in Canada for between 5 and 25 years.

This diversity of parents in this study underscores some critical aspects about Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s education. First, in addition to being been historically under-privileged and marginalized within the French-language education system, the education level of these parents, their socio-economic status, their ability to integrate in the host society, and their life experiences are different from those of the dominant group, that is, the Franco-Ontarians. I use the term “dominant group” here to highlight the fact that demographically the population size of the native French Canadians from Ontario is significantly higher compared to that of other immigrant Francophones, in this case the Black Francophones of African origin. It is also to underscore the imbalance in distribution of powers, which weighs heavily in favor of the native French Canadians within the Francophone community at large. Second, the fact that the French language is the language of schooling in the countries of origin of these parents does not imply that they share similar cultural values, educational understanding
and experiences, and the same perspectives of the school system in general, and French-language schools in particular. These aspects have been underscored later in the study’s two findings chapters.

**Table 2**

*Profile of Participant Parents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Geographic region in Africa</th>
<th>Years. in Canada</th>
<th>Number of children in elementary school</th>
<th>Number of children in secondary school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lajoie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comrad</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doucette</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moriba</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toufasson</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>East-Central</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kankou</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etienne</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>East-Central</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Community leaders.*

Three Black community leaders were interviewed for this study. Two of the community leaders believed that their leadership in their respective communities stemmed from their personal characters, skills, conduct, and trust bestowed in them by the community. The third leader believed that, in addition to the skills and attributes mentioned by the other two community leaders, his leadership was connected also to his spiritual connectedness. Three
Community leaders arrived in Canada at different times and with diverse life experiences. For instance, one of them, Sekou, travelled throughout Africa and Eastern Europe before landing to Canada as a refugee, over 20 years ago. He held several menial occupations, including graveyard work, security guard, employee at an employment agency, tutor of French language as a second language and Arabic, dishwasher, and a day worker. Sekou is a devoted Muslim who, according to him, is certainly an important factor in how his community people look at him. As I explained in the findings chapters, although the religious affiliation of the community leaders was not a determining factor in my sampling, it nonetheless was revealed to be important in understanding the extent to which religion affects the understanding and perceptions about schooling.

At the time of my interviews, none of the participating community leaders had a child attending the schools in this study. This was not deliberate; instead, this happened by chance. A profile of the three leaders is summarized in Table 3. As the table shows, each of the three community leaders was men and has been in Canada for between 15 and 21 years. Like the parents, they were immigrants themselves and came to Canada for a better life for their families.

According to these community leaders, there was a wide range of difference between, as well as within, each of the community group. Put differently, each community was characterized by its own specificities, ethnicity, tradition, beliefs, values, and so on. Although none of the community leaders was able to provide an up-to-date account of their memberships, they were able, though, to give rough estimates of what they all labeled as “fast growing” communities. Those estimates range from 800 people to over 1,500 people.
Table 3

Profile of Participant Community Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Years in Canada</th>
<th>Number of community members (including children)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centranze</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Over 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yombo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Between 1,000 – 2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sekou</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Over 1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teachers.**

To balance the viewpoints of parents and community leaders in this inquiry, I also interviewed four teachers including one minority Black francophone teacher and one teacher of the dominant group per school. Since each of the teachers had at least one full school year of teaching experience, they all qualified to participate in this research. The two teachers of the dominant group were respectively born in Canada and in France. Similarly, the two Black teachers were from different African countries with French as the language of administration in their countries. Table 4 highlights a portrait of the four participating teachers.
Table 4

Profile of Participant Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Years in Canada</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience in Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diougrand</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellehumeur</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ondiquoi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 shows, at the time of this study each of the immigrant teachers had been in Canada for between 18 to 20 years. All the teachers had between 9 and 18 years of teaching experience in Canada. While one of the two Black teachers indicated that he has been in the same school since he started teaching, the other teacher has only changed school once. As for the teachers of the dominant group, one indicated that his current school is his third since he began his teaching career and the other teacher has only changed school once.

**Procedure**

Participants in this research were drawn from parents, community leaders and teachers’ groups. With the exception of community leaders, participants were solicited through the school principal's office. Prior to approaching each subject, an administrative consent was sent to the Director of the school board, explaining the purpose of the research and asking to gain access to educators and parents (see Appendices A & B). After permission was granted, each school principal was sent a letter explaining, again, the study and asking permission to have the researcher interview school teachers (see Appendices C & D), and to extend the research’s
invitation to teachers and parents for the study (see Appendices E & F). In the process, principals were asked to distribute the researcher’s invitation letters to parents through the school children. Teachers and parents were to contact the researcher if they are interested in participating. Community leaders were solicited directly through community associations (see Appendix I & J)

Participants interested in the research had 2 weeks to confirm their participation. Participants were confirmed / assured strict confidentiality regarding information obtained from them. In addition, a copy of the interview questionnaires was given to each participant prior to the interview (see Appendices K, L, & M).

**Interview Approach**

Interviews serve the purpose of "obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 268). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), semi-structured interviews encourage interviewees to expand upon ideas, which provide the researcher opportunities to generate abstract ideas through descriptive material. My approach consisted of formal audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured format was adopted because it allowed the researcher to develop more questions during the interview and adjust the researcher’s predetermined questions according to the participants’ responses. Moreover, it ensured that each respondent’s experiences with the French-language school system were fully captured. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to review the letter of consent and to indicate their willingness to participate in the study by signing at the bottom of the letter of consent. Consenting participants were also asked to indicate whether they would like to receive a copy of the summary of the study’s findings. The location and time for interviews were left to
the discretion of each participant. As I mentioned earlier, to respect confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym. Three steps were followed during this phase:

Step 1: Each participant was interviewed for at least 45 minutes. Two of the interviews lasted for more than 1 hour 45 minutes. While the interviews with parents went according to plans, I had to make some adjustments with the community leaders. I initially planned to interview only two community leaders, but after completing the initial two interviews, I realized that community leaders’ data were not as rich as I had hoped. As a result, I felt the need to interview one more community leader in order to obtain a much richer data.

Interview questions (see Appendices K, L, & M) were general in nature; however, they reflected the focus of the interview from which I generated discussion topics for other stages of this research. Each participant had the choice of either using French or English as the interview language. For that reason, interview questions were in both French and English because I anticipated that Black Francophones with limited education in French tend to be comfortable in English as a language of communication; therefore these participants may be inclined to use the English language for their interview. I took great care not to inadvertently shape a dialogue into one that suited my ideas or perceptions, and decided to have initial interviews followed up with telephone calls if necessary for clarifications or to confirm my understanding of some of the participant’s comments made during the interview. Thus, in one case I had to interview the respondent twice because the first interview was interrupted so often due to family commitments that this parent asked for another interview.
Data Collection

Data collection procedures ought to generate the “thick description” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1988) necessary to provide illuminating insights into the relationships between parents and the schools. Data collection for this study began in March 2008 and was completed by early August 2008. It involved three steps:

Parents: Invitation letters to parents were sent out during the second week of March 2008 through the school’s principal office (see Appendices C & D). Subsequently, on March 18, 2008, each of the eight participating parents received a call from the researcher confirming and explaining the purpose of the study. Parents were also asked whether they could participate in the study. Interviews time and locations were discussed during the calls. Parents were assured that neither their personal identity nor the identity of their children’s school would be released in the research; that the interview data, which will be used exclusively for the sole purpose of the research, will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Parents showed enthusiasm for this research; they were eager to share their viewpoints with the researcher on the topic that one of them labelled as “a very important step.” They also indicated that the hope they could get something out of it themselves, something that might help them with their children at home. These parents, needless to say, were comfortable with the researcher and indicated that they trusted the researcher. Interviews places were determined by parents and all but one of the interviews took place in public arenas (coffee and shopping malls mostly) at the time convenient for the interviewees. One of the parents requested that the interview take place at her home because of family commitments. All of the interviews took place on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) because that was the most convenient time for the parents. Since all the interviews took place in a chosen designated place, this enabled both the researcher and the participants to
develop a level of mutual comfort about each other. As the researcher, I sometimes felt as if I was involved in the actual experiences of the participants.

Formal interviews with parents were completed on March 29, 2008. Thereafter, I made a few follow up phone calls to clarify some earlier accounts. This step was followed the interviews with the community leaders.

Community leaders: Data collected from the community leaders occurred in May 2008. However, introductory phone calls to them were made on March 22, 2008 (see Appendices I & J). As I did with the parents, I explained to the community’s respondents the purpose of the research and assured them of anonymity and confidentiality for their stories. Assurance was also given that interview data will be used exclusively for the sole purpose of the research, and that data will be destroyed upon completion of the study. The community respondents, too, showed a great deal of enthusiasm and support for the research. Each one set their interview time and location, and wished me “good luck.” Their interviews took place in the public arena as well except for one of the leaders who asked that his interview to take place in the community’s mosque.

Teachers: Interviews with the four teachers of the study occurred right as the school year was ending in the last 2 weeks of June 2008. I interviewed three of the teachers during the school day in their respective school, and the fourth teacher was interviewed in a shopping mall nearby his home. Each of the four teachers had the opportunity to review the letter of consent before agreeing to participate in the study. They received assurances of confidentiality and anonymity throughout and after the study’s completion.

I was fortunate that the study’s participants were all available as soon as they were contacted. As a researcher who shares the same racial background with participating parents,
community leaders and two of the Black teachers interviewed, I was also fortunate for the level of comfort of the participants during and after the interviews.

As I indicated before, interviews for each of the participants were transcribed first in French and then translated into English. I edited participants’ verbatim narratives in French before translation into English, for readability purposes only. I did not change their meaning nor did I add my own perspective to them because it was important not to strip the data at hand from the context in which they occurred.

The previously mentioned stages were followed with a review of Ministry of Education policies regarding parental involvement in school, which I have highlighted in the preceding chapter in the review of the literature. In undertaking such a review, my aim was to make a critical examination of the Ministry’s support, if any, towards the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education. This review was also important for the following two reasons:

1. The Ontario Ministry of Education supports recognition of effective parents’ involvement as a new performance measure of the publicly funded education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, *Ontario Education, Excellence for All*, 2005), and

2. The Ministry’s new approach to parents’ involvement in school is considered as a way to improve the dynamics within the system to overcome barriers, anticipate the potential issues, and foster new attitudes about healthy levels of parents’ commitment for children’s education (Ontario Ministry of Education, *Energizing Ontario Schools*, 2007).
Summarized in Table 5 is the connection between research questions, research method, and questions that I asked, and as adapted from Flessa (2003).

**Table 5**

*Connection Between Research Questions, Method, and What Was Asked*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>What was asked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in their children’s education?</td>
<td>Interviews with parents</td>
<td>Interview questions included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How are you involved in your child / children’s formal education, and why did you choose this type of involvement strategy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with community leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td>• What can you tell me regarding: i) the French-language school system and parental involvement in school, and ii) the role you play (or can play) to foster and facilitate family-school and community relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td>• What does the involvement in school (or the lack of it) of minoritized parents mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you think that minoritized parents are involved in their children’s schooling? If yes, what activities they participate in mostly and why is it that they choose those activities? If not, what barriers hinder their involvement, and what have you done to support / encourage it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>What was asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What strategies do Francophone parents of African origin employ in their involvement in their children’s formal education?</td>
<td>Interviews with parents</td>
<td>Interview questions included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• In your views, what specific strategies do you use and what other strategies do you believe can help parents to become more involved in their children’s education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How do you negotiate your double minority status within the Franco-Ontarian society, in general, and your experiences in dealing with the schooling of your children in particular?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with community leaders</td>
<td>• How do you negotiate your double minority status within the Franco-Ontarian society, in general, and your experiences with parents in dealing with the schooling of their children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with teachers</td>
<td>Interview questions included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you do to help encourage or support the involvement of Black Francophones of African origin? What resources do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth, etc.) of Black Francophone parents’ involvement in these strategies?</td>
<td>Interviews with parents</td>
<td>Interview questions included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What is the nature (i.e., extent / depth) of your involvement in the activity / activities you have chosen to participate in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with community leaders</td>
<td>• Same as in previous research question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>What was asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with teachers</td>
<td>Interview questions included</td>
<td>- Can you give examples of how the involvement of parents contributes to your daily work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What inhibits or facilitate their participation in school?</td>
<td>Interviews with parents</td>
<td>Interview questions included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- What challenges / inhibitors do you have in the exercise of your support to your child / children’s schooling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with community leaders</td>
<td>- In your opinion, what inhibit the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Do you think that Black francophone parents are involved in their children’s schooling? If yes, what activities they participate in and why is it that they choose those activities? If not, what barriers hinder their involvement, and what have you done to support / encourage these parents?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis and Management

Keeping in mind the main research questions posed in chapter one and the theoretical framework of this study, I first reviewed the data from the interviews. In doing so, I followed Silverman’s (2005, p. 154) advice “to treat respondents’ answers as describing some external reality (e.g., facts, events) or internal experience (e.g., feelings, meanings).” Then, I transcribed, personally, all the 15 tape-recorded interviews (eight parents, three community leaders, and four teachers) in French. Before moving forward, I offered each participant the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and alter them if they wished. Only one of the community leaders reviewed his transcript. I had phone conversations with two of the parents to clarify some of their accounts. Next, I translated the transcriptions into English. In the process, I paid a special attention to what the four respondent teachers said because parental involvement takes place within educational institutions and norms within those institutions are defined by the dominant group. Most teachers belong to the dominant group and they are usually perceived in literature as instrumental in facilitating or deterring the participation of parents in their children’s school (Blackledge, 2000; Dyson, 2001; Kim, 2004; Whittaker, 2003).

Upon completion of this phase, the “nitty-gritty” of the analysis began. First, I read all the interviews to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning. In other words, I sought to discover what general ideas each participating groups was saying. Then I began the coding process, that is, organizing the materials into “chunks” before bringing meaning to those “chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, as cited in Creswell, 2003). Data were organized according to participant groups and research questions, highlighting what I considered as relevant information. A master coding list emerged from the process during which I used alphanumerical letters for the codes. For instance, TPMA22 referred to “transcript of respondent
Within each research question, response categories were counted by frequency, taking into account recurring information and comparing similarities and differences. This time consuming process also involved paying attention to what seemed credible, flushed out of unwanted data. At this point, I had to move coded data from one unit to another within the same sub-category, or even to units in other sub-categories that were a better match. Units were eventually merged with other units, creating new and specific properties. I eventually ended up with these categories, which made up of the research findings: roles of the society, the school, the government and parents themselves.

**Ethical Considerations**

We cannot focus only on the quality of the knowledge we are producing, as if its truth were all that counts. We must also consider the rightness or wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 288). This study was conducted in strict confidentiality and in compliance with guidelines set out by the Office of Research Ethics of the University of Toronto, which approved my research protocol on February 28, 2008. As noted earlier, pseudonyms were given to both the schools and the participants involved. Moreover, prior to interviews each of the participants was to sign a consent form. The form outlined the nature of the study and the assurance that participants can withdraw from the study at any time and for any grounds without any consequences, penalty or judgment. All the participants were free to withdraw from the study for whatever reason, and they were informed that if a participant chooses to exercise that option any information gathered from him / her will be destroyed in a shredder. Participants were also given
the assurance that they can refuse to answer, without explanation, any question in the interview. Access to the research data was kept confidential and only the researcher (and if required his faculty supervisor) had access to them. Participants were offered the opportunity to request a copy of the study’s summary through their preferred means of communications (in person, mail, electronic, fax).

Limitations

Generalizing from qualitative research is always a concern (Seidman, 1998). In this study, which examined the involvement of Black francophone parents in two of Ontario’s publicly funded French-language schools, it would be inappropriate to generalize the findings to broader context without a sincere sensitivity to the limitations of my inquiry – a small number of schools, two out of over 300 elementary French-language schools, including Catholic schools in twelve district school boards. This is due, in part, of the relatively small pool of public French-language schools available. A larger number of schools might have strengthened the findings of this study. Other limitations regarding the outcomes of this study are the make up and size of the research participants. First, the eight parents should not be deemed representative of the Black francophone parents as a whole. Besides the skin colour, there are a number of differentiating factors (ethnicity, culture, county of origin, etc.) between these parents. Similarly, community leaders do not (and cannot) speak for all the parents in their respective communities, considering the different ethnicities and other social factors and considerations. Therefore, their voices may not fully be representative of everyone in their communities.

Information collected from some participants may be distorted or deficient in that in any qualitative research, there is almost always a likelihood, however small, that some accounts may have been said to please the researcher, but the researcher has no way of knowing and
controlling that. Nonetheless, as the researcher I share the view that this study can unmask and provide further insights into French-language schools’ policies and practices towards those who sustain the viability of many of the schools, particularly the urban ones.

Teachers’ voices in this study need to be placed in context and interpreted with caution because there are few Black francophone teachers compared to White teachers in the schools in this study. By virtue of the small representation of Black teachers, their voices tend to be influenced by the teachers of the dominant group. Moreover, the study’s participants were selected on a voluntary and not random basis. This means that each Black parent did not have the chance to be included in the study.

Although all of the participants, apart from two teachers, were drawn from a large pool of racial francophone immigrants; other key stakeholders including school leadership and students were excluded in this study. Hence, this could be open to bias in the interpretation of the study’s findings. The saliency of students’ voices in this research is worth of emphasis because according to Bronfenbrenner’s ecology theory, parents like children, function within multiple contexts or ecologies that influence each other and help shape the behavior of parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1989, as cited in Overstreet, 2005, p. 102). Students’ voices are constructive and informative and can help schools to build strong partnerships with the community (Rudduck et al., 2003). As a result, “parental involvement in school is likely to be influenced not just by individual characteristics but also by characteristics of the child and school as well as community norms and cultural beliefs.” Moreover, with the absence of children as potential actors in parental involvement in this study, the home-school and community relationship may be perceived as one in which parents and teachers’ attitudes are crucial, while children’s perspectives are less weighty. In other words, that children cannot shape and work
towards encouraging / supporting or facilitating their parents’ involvement in school. While I know of no studies that specifically focus on Black children’s understandings of parental involvement, I found out from the parents during this research some indications that perhaps children can make positive contributions to our understanding of Black parents’ involvement in school with the right upbringing.

**Summary**

The chapter highlighted the methodological approach that I took in conducting this study. Recognizing the variations that exist in qualitative studies, the chapter was developed in conformity with the conceptual and theoretical framework as well as the five research questions. It begins with an introduction of the research design utilized followed by a description of the research sampling, which focused on parents, community leaders and teachers. How the participants were selected and my approach to the interviews followed next. These participants were selected in conformity with the University of Toronto’s research guidelines. Next, the data collection and management was examined. I concluded this chapter with a highlight of some ethical considerations as well as limitations for this study.

The next chapter will focus on the findings of this study by first examining how Black francophone define the term involvement in school, to what extent they are involved in school, and what strategy, if any, do they employ in becoming involved in school. In order words, it explores how they understand their role in relation to that of their children’s schooling in a double minority setting. The following chapter will also highlight what really prevents these parents from becoming involved in their children’s education.
Chapter Four:
Understanding Involvement In School

Introduction

Carefully defining parental involvement in school is a necessary precondition for identifying the factors that influence it (Keith, 1991, as cited in Feuerstein, 2000).

“The need to define parental involvement by minority parents is salient for elementary schools that are both challenged by poverty and struggling to involve and engage parents in schoolcentric activities” (Lawson, 2003, p. 82).

To fully capture family-school interactions, families need to be seen as educative environments. To attend to children effectively in one setting, the adult sponsors would have to be aware of life in the other, see the child’s experience as continuous, and seek an integration of educational realms (Ligthfoot, 1978).

Understanding the school system is critical for educational stakeholders’ attitude toward schools. More importantly, for racial, marginalized and under-privileged parents, understanding the institution called “school,” how it operates with its myriad services and functions can either facilitate their relationship with schools, or deter them from participating in school-related functions. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive account of the voices of the research participants on how they perceive French language public schools in a large multicultural city and how they define, understand, and rationalize their involvement or lack of it in and outside those institutions. The chapter highlights not only parents’ understanding of their role in their children’s education, but it also sheds light on how community leaders and teachers define parental involvement in school and how they themselves facilitate / support it.
Community leaders and teachers’ perspectives regarding parental involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education are particularly important for this study because these leaders and teachers play a significant role in how marginalized groups perceive the school. The study’s data suggest that teachers’ viewpoints of how Black francophone parents understand parental involvement in school vary according to teachers’ own racial groups.

In this chapter, I choose to amplify the research participants’ feelings, voices, ideas, and the genuineness of their words by quoting them directly side by side in French and English when appropriate. The voices in this study provide the participants’ perceptions and interpretations of the meaning drawn from their experiences in school and in life. I have highlighted only what I, as the researcher, deem of most value and interest for this study. However, the accounts are not stripped from their meanings, because meanings matter. A word or a phrase does not contain its meaning as a bucket contains water, but has the meaning it does by being a choice made about its significance in a given context (Bliss, Monk, & Ogborn, 1983, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56).

Data for this chapter were collected in accordance with the theoretical framework to answer these three sub-questions of my research question: How are Black francophone parents of African origin involved in their children’s formal education within the French-language schools?

1. How parents of African origin do understand the term “involvement” in children’s education?

2. What strategies, if any, do they employ in their involvement, and to what extent they are involved?
3. What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of their involvement in their children’s formal education?

The goal for posing these questions at the outset of my interviews with participants was threefold: first, to have a sense of participants’ understanding of involvement in school/education and to find out why they see involvement in children’s education the way they do; second, to contrast the participants’ understanding of the term involvement in school with the traditional home-school-community models, which describe parental involvement in school as participation in specific scripted school-based activities; third, to elicit the degree of involvement of those who are the primary stakeholders in children’s education.

Responses to these sub-questions show that the study’s participants concur about the significance and usefulness of helping children achieve educational success. However, the meaning parents give to involvement in education and the extent to which they are involved in their children’s education or, are willing to be involved, vary widely and they allude frequently to phenomenological and logistical barriers (Fullan, 1982). Phenomenological barriers refer to lack of knowledge and understanding that educators and parents have of each other’s subjective worlds. Logistical or technical obstacles refer to lack of time, opportunity and expertise about activities or forms of parent involvement.

Given that parental participation in children’s education is best understood in the context of the role that other key education stakeholders play in children’s education, participants’ responses to the research questions have been presented from three perspectives in this chapter: the first perspective is that of parents; the second is from community leaders; and the third perspective relates to teachers.
The rationale behind choosing and dividing my data according to these three groups derives from the fact that parents, teachers and community leaders are the main stakeholders in the learning and life success of children. In the case of Black Francophones, their relationships with French-language schools cannot be fully understood without putting it in the context in which teachers and community leaders play a critical role. Parents have the most important influence in children’s life outside of school, and this is true for children’s education as well. Long after direct learning from parents in a child’s early years gives way to formal education, parents continue to play a key role in student success through the attitudes they help to shape and the direct supports they provide. Therefore, parents are in the best position to tell the school about their concerns with respect to the education of their children and to help the school meet the needs of the children. Moreover, since parents are the primary contacts for a child, teachers and community leaders’ roles supplement and sometimes guide parents in their drive to have the best educational outcome for their children. In most African immigrant communities, for instance, parents, educators and community leaders are considered as adults who are responsible for their own happiness as well as for that of children, provided they do not leave their children and never abandon their own responsibility for them. The roles of these three stakeholders (parents, teachers and community leaders) in children’s education are unquestionably interconnected and, therefore, critical in facilitating Black children's development and achievement, and in preventing and remedying educational and developmental problems of these children.

Another reason for choosing to have parents, teachers and community leaders as the center piece of the data analysis, stems from my long-held opinion that these three stakeholder groups need to work together toward a common goal and share responsibilities in order for a
child to do well in school. Ideally, all children, including African children, view their parents as their first teachers. When they see that parents, teachers and community leaders are involved in their education, they become motivated to do better in school. With that in mind, the next section explores how Black francophone parents understand and define involvement in their children’s schooling within two publicly funded French-language schools in a large multicultural city in Canada.

**Parents**

Minority parents, in general, with notable reference to the participants I interviewed in this study, have noble dreams and high hopes for their children. Parents who participated in this study were asked to define “involvement in school” in their own words according to their own lived experiences and in their language of choice that is, in either French or English. No restrictions were put on their perceptions, interpretations, and ways of defining their involvement in their children’s education. As a result, the research reveals that for racialized minority parents of African origin, involvement in schooling is a multi-faceted concept for which there is no unique definition. Although minority parents’ understanding of involvement in school is vague (Parhar, 2000), most of the parents interviewed in this study understand involvement in their children’s education in relation to “what the schools do for parents” and “what parents do for the school.” These parents mostly define involvement in schooling in relation to barriers they have experienced (or are experiencing) with French-language schools and society. Parents use a pattern of cumulative negative experiences and feelings they have had with the French-language schools to tell me, the researcher, what involvement in their children’s education means to them and how they define it. In the course of the data collection, some of the parents refer at length to a wide range of activities already cited in the literature. Broadly categorized, these activities
include home and/or school-based activities. Home-based activities mostly refer to Epstein’s (2002) typologies of forms of involvement encompassing good parenting, helping children with their homework, and accompanying children to extra-curricular activities. School-based activities refer to logistical activities, which entail attending school activities and/or programs, and maintaining good rapport with teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders.

While a few parents understand involvement as being available to meet with the teacher when he or she calls, the majority of parents consider cultural integration of their children and their parents as a fundamental ingredient required for better understanding and involvement in school. These parents believe that cultural integration (or lack of it) influences their relationship with French-language schools. For Doucette, to define involvement in children’s education is also to “raise cultural and social integration issues that require mutual understanding between the school and the parent.” For Moriba, “without cultural understanding there is no mutual understanding between the parent and the school.” This comment underscores the need to take into account the role of cultural integration in the school, because as much as a child must understand the education system, it is equally important that the school understands the child. This is crucial because some parents can feel comfortable with the school if they know that the school cares about their children who usually arrive to school with two distinct cultures: the Canadian culture and that of the parent’s country of origin.

These comments suggest that as much as schools want to involve parents in their activities, parents, too, want schools to adopt a more open approach regarding their children’s cultures and specificities. Parents believe that they are and will remain different from the school in many ways. Consequently, these parents share the view that it is up to the education system to
be culturally sensitive and inclusive so that parents can fully participate in their children’s schooling.

In other words, Black parents’ involvement in school should be taken as a shared responsibility, which calls for both the school and the parents to inculcate good citizenry in every child. However, in Toufasson’s view, the school’s attitude with Black parents and other racial minority parents conflicts with the understanding parents have of their role in children’s education. In African traditions, community values, including collective responsibilities, are necessary to understand the meaning of the relationship between the school and the parent. The community educates children in a respectful environment that inculcates traditional polity. In Western societies like Canada, there is a propensity to undermine what some immigrant families and communities value by sending contradictory signals from the school to the children’s home. This approach of involvement in school leaves many [parents] perplexed as to how to define their relationship with their children’s education in their host country.

The data from this study suggest that for Black francophone parents, defining involvement in school cannot be made in isolation without a mutual understanding between the school community and the immigrant families. Comrad has now two grown kids in a secondary school and has been involved in francophone organizations since arriving in Ontario more than two decades ago. He believes that parents’ involvement in school should be defined in a comprehensive manner, that is, in relation to what Black francophones bring into the school, and what the school does to include these parents. He contends:
…l’école appartient à nous tous.
Par conséquent, parler de la
participation dans l’éducation de
leurs enfants devrait être débattu
de façon ouverte et complète c'est-
à-dire, prendre d’abord en compte
toutes les valeurs que la
communauté, l’école, et les
enfants amènent à l’école. L’école
[de langue française] ne connaît
pas ses communautés, et si elle les
connaît, alors elle ignore les
avantages qu’elle peut tirer dans
un partenariat avec l’école. On
demande constamment aux
parents qu’est ce qu’ils pensent de
la relation entre l’école et la
famille ? La question devrait plus
tôt être «Qu’est ce que l’école
connaît de sa communauté et
qu’est ce qu’elle fait pour nous
encourager et supporter pour
participer comme les parents
blancs?

… the school belongs to all of
us; therefore, [parents’
involvement] should be
discussed in a holistic
manner. That is taking into
account values that the
community, school, and
children bring into the
classroom. [French-language]
schools do not know their
communities, and if they do,
they overlook community
values and contributions from
which they can benefit in
collaborating with their
members. Repeatedly, parents
are always asked, “what do
you think about home-school
relationship?” Instead, the
question should be, “How
much does the school know
about its community and
what does it do to encourage
and support us to become
involved like White parents?”

Despite Comrad’s strong belief regarding the need to have the school and the community
work together for parental involvement, he was unable to offer any real examples of strategies
that he employs with his children. When I asked him to talk about his strategies for involvement
as well as his degree of participation in his children’s school, he responded, “I cannot give any visible forms of involvement, but I did help and continue to help my children with their homework. I continue to demand that schools must reach out to parents first.” This form of invisible participation in children’s schooling is often overlooked in traditional approaches to home-school relationships. Many parents express concern for visibility in school and at the same time remain involved in learning activities that are not normally observed by teachers. Comrad’s narrative also suggests that there are invisible forms of parents’ involvement that are practiced by Black francophone families. In most of these families, only one of the parents is the breadwinner and the other is the caregiver.

For Black francophones, especially newly arrived immigrants, school experiences in the country of origin constitute the first reference framework they use when dealing with the school system in Canada. They reminisce about past educational experiences when asked to define involvement in their children’s education. Some become ill at ease and, at times, reticent about discussing their understanding of parental involvement in school. Etienne reveals that he has always been apprehensive when talking about his children and their school. He adds, “I don’t like to talk about the school. I am apprehensive, and my apprehension comes from not knowing well the country [Canada], the people or the system. This apprehension is rooted in me when it comes to school matters.” Later on Etienne confesses that he is some times angry about things he sees when he drops off his kids to school or when he watches news on the television about Black kids. Etienne’s apprehension is understandable; he finds intolerable the conduct of educational institutions toward minority groups. Etienne may not have a university degree but he is knowledgeable and mindful of the need for parents to stand up for their children. Unlike him, though, for Black francophone parents who do not know the Canadian education system or the
system in which they felt behind in their country of origin, dealing with the school system in Canada is synonymous of throwing them in the middle of sea and asking them to swim to shore.

It was not surprising that in the course of my interviews, one of the parents claimed that not all francophone parents of African origin understand what involvement in children’s education means. In other words, there are parents in the African francophone communities who have no understanding of the schools’ expectations in general and French-language schools in particular. There are also parents with negative school experiences who feel either intimidated or alienated and, as a result, make no effort to learn about the education system in Canada. These parents stay away from, or adopt a cautious approach with the system. Lajoie comments:

Because of negative school experiences in the home country, you are afraid when you are new to this country and the school system, and that fear prevents many from doing things such as looking for a good school. We were only drawing parallels with the kind of relationships schools maintain with parents in our country. In Ontario, we did not know how the school functions in relation to parents’ involvement. We were wary.

For some parents, defining involvement in school and understanding the relationship between parents and the school in Canada can also be blurred by the Ministry of Education policies and regulations. Section 23 of the Canadian Charters of Rights and Freedoms (discussed in chapter 5) is cited as a source of confusion for how immigrant parents understand, perceive, and define involvement in schools in Ontario. This confusion stems from the fact that for people living outside this country, Canada is depicted as a land with two official languages, and immigrant parents often expect the country to live up to that expectation by allowing their children to enroll in French language schools without their linguistic belonging being questioned. However, when dealing with French-language schools, Black parents of African origin are often
regarded and treated as second class Francophones. Their comprehension of the French language is frequently questioned and their children are welcomed as “foreignness.” Lajoie explains his feelings and confusion after meeting the first time with his daughter’s school officials, and how this experience continues to affect his relationship with the [French-language] education system in Ontario:

...À mon premier contact avec l’école, la référence à la section 23 de la Charte canadienne des droits et libertés m’a complètement pris par surprise. Je ne comprenais rien quand j’ai amené ma fille à l’école le premier jour [de classe]. C’est après que j’ai commencé à poser des questions. Je voulais d’abord savoir si cette [Section] 23 affecte ma fille et comment ?

Plus tard, quand j’ai compris ce que cette section signifiait, je me suis dis tiens, il faut bien s’impliquer dans cette école francophone si je veux que tout ce passe bien pour ma fille. Et voilà comment je suis devenu membre du conseil de parents de l’école. Par conséquent, pour moi et pour bien d’autres, la participation à l’école veut dire faire tout ce qu’on peut pour le

...At my first meeting at the school, I was completely taken aback by the reference to Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I did not understand anything [about these policies] when I took my daughter to school on her first school day. It was after that I started asking questions. I wanted to know if this section [Section 23] affects my daughter. After I found out later the significance of Section 23, I said to myself that I needed, indeed, to be involved in my daughter’s school if I wanted to ensure that everything would be fine for her. This is how I became involved in parents’ council of the school a few years later. Therefore, in my opinion and in the opinion of others,
succès des enfants, ce qui signifie enseigner à l’enfant l’importance de travailler fort dans la vie.

involvement in school means doing what is right for the success of the children that includes teaching the child the value of working hard in life.

This comment suggests that constitutional measures to protect the official linguistic White Francophones of Ontario also places restrictions on racial minorities living within the White francophone minority society, and thereby confuses them when it comes to understanding involvement in school. It also implies that parents do more for their children in other ways. As Lajoie added, “We teach them [children] how to become a better person in life, how to respect elders, etc. Don’t you think that these are more important than throwing in my face (Section 23), which is more an obstacle rather than something that helps my children.”

Other formal school organizational structures like school councils are found not to facilitate or encourage the involvement of racial francophone parents in their children’s education. For instance, another participating parent, Kakou, describes the school council as “folklore,” that is a superficial forum that does not offer anything to minority parents that would be of benefit in their children’s education. Despite the fact that she arrived in Ontario only 6 years ago, Kankou wanted to prove that she knows the value of education. She states, “Involvement is to be there and do what needs to be done. I am always there for my kids. I take them to swimming lessons, piano, and talk to them about the value of working hard in school, because I know that excellence in education lay the foundation for success in society ” She continues, “I wanted to jump right in the sea and help my kids and others. But, I quickly learned that that was a mistake.”
As indicated earlier, generally speaking, the initial experience of Black Francophones with the French-language school system can dictate how involved parents become involved in their children’s education. The greeting parents receive at the school can be either a deterrent for involvement or conducive for positive future interactions with the school. In that regard, the school leadership plays a significant role in parents’ decision about whether or not to become involved in the school. Thus, if the school principal is open-minded, understanding and knowledgeable about the school community, his / her actions can lead to fruitful partnerships with the school and community members. In effect, a warm, welcoming environment would encourage more parents to become involved in school-related activities. Alternatively, there can be a negative effect on parents’ perceptions toward the school, leading to little or no involvement in the school community. The treatment Lajoie received from the principal of his daughter’s school illustrates this point:

…Je vais te conter une anecdote. Avant je pouvais téléphoner directement au directeur de l’école de ma fille. Celui-ci était d’origine ethnique. Ce dernier a changé d’école et moi je ne le savais pas. Alors un jour j’ai téléphoné au même numéro parce que je voulais obtenir des renseignements et à ma grande surprise, la nouvelle directrice a pris le téléphone et m’a sommé de ne plus jamais appelé sur sa ligne directe. Elle m’a dit

…I am going to tell an anecdote. At the beginning of my interactions with my daughter’s school, I used to call directly the principal of my daughter’s school. He was of an ethnic racial background. One day, not knowing that the school principal had moved to another school, I called him for school-related concerns and to my surprise, there was a new principal who picked up the phone and told me in a demeaning tone never use that
d’appeler le numéro central si j’ai des questions. Le moins que je puisse dire c’est que elle m’a parlé d’un ton désobligeant. Depuis ce jour là, je n’ai jamais appelé l’école.

phone number to call the school because that line, she said, was exclusively for the principal. She asked me to call the main line for any queries I may have about the school in the future. To say the least, I felt like garbage, someone that they do not need there. Since then, I never called the school again.

Lajoie’s treatment by the school’s principal is what Kankou refers to as the “back hand welcoming” practice in the French-language education system. This practice, according to Kankou, makes parents believe that they can be part of the [school] system, but in reality, they cannot because the door is locked from the inside. As a result, even if parents who understand their roles and responsibilities regarding their children’s schooling are “turned off” by the school. For Kankou, parents’ understanding of involvement may vary from one parent to another, but he also feels that the school system should embrace everyone uniformly.

Despite integration and adaptation challenges that many racialized Black francophone parents face in Canada, some have tried to become involved in their children’s education almost immediately after they arrived in the host country. The school experience in their country of origin and professional networks in Canada have helped these parents understand quickly how to navigate the system. Through his workplace, Etienne made professional connections that helped him discover early on the benefits of school involvement. He explains:
As an immigrant, I did not know how the school system operates here. I did not know whether to become involved or stay away from the school. Later, when I decided to become involved, I did not even know where to begin. Luckily, my coworkers were there for me at the right time. They have helped me to understand the education system better. This has helped me to understand better what it means to become involved in my children’s education. Even though my two kids are in now in high school, it took a great deal for me to know that every thing that I do for their academic school success is an involvement activity.

The learning curve that Etienne refers to eventually helped him to become involved in many school activities. It is the same learning curve that Janine went through when she realized that her children needed spiritual teaching in order to become responsible adults in life.

*Religion: The Umbrella for Parents’ Perception of Involvement in School*

Although the word “religion” conveys dramatically different meanings to different people, its relevance in school and for parents cannot be overstated. Students who know something about the diverse forms of religious belief and expression will generally find this knowledge beneficial in understanding other aspects of the school curriculum. Religious belief and expression are an integral part of such aspects of society as politics, history, art, music, language and literature, architecture, attitudes to people, and attitudes to nature and the environment. Therefore, according to Janine, involvement in her children’s education is best captured through a religious lens. Janine understands and defines involvement in school by alluding to her religion. She narrates:

Moi je définie la participation à l’école en relation avec la religion puisque la participation

I define involvement in school in terms of religion because the need for parental involvement
parentale remonte au temps bibliques. Par exemple, la bible nous enseigne d’élèver un enfant de la façon qu’on veut qu’il se comporte dans la vie, et qu’à sa vieillesse il ne se débarrassera pas de cette attitude. Par conséquent, je crois que les convictions religieuses des parents peuvent aider dans l’éducation de leurs enfants. Nous sommes des croyants et nous voulons que nos enfants grandissent selon nos croyances. Humm… Un enfant qui grandit dans une famille religieuse apprend beaucoup de choses sur la façon de se comporter tant à l’école que dans la vie. Je pense que les parents qui amènent leurs enfants à l’église et qui leur lisent des petites histoires bibliques à l’heure du coucher, développent chez les enfants l’amour d’apprendre. En plus, il permet aux enfants de comprendre que la discipline est nécessaire dans l’éducation ; que le respect des parents et des enseignants est aussi nécessaire ; qu’un bon
can be traced back as far as biblical scripture. For example, the bible tells us to raise a child in a proper way that is in a way that should be beneficial for the child in childhood. Therefore, I believe that parents’ religious beliefs can guide and help parents understand how to deal with their children’s education. We are believers and we want our kids to follow our footsteps the same way. A child raised in a religious family learns a lot about how to behave in school and in life. I believe that parents who take their youngsters to church and share with them Bible stories at bedtime, develop in children the love for learning. Moreover, it helps children understand that discipline is necessary in life; that respect of teachers and parents are necessary; that good behavior and treatment of others are necessary. All of those things are taught in the Bible.
comportement ainsi que le respect des autres sont nécessaires. La bible enseigne toutes ces choses.

Given that the history of Canada was shaped by a variety of religious traditions, including Native spiritual traditions and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches, Janine’s comments suggest that an awareness and understanding of the role of religions can help. Indeed, some parents understand and define their role in terms of religion in their children’s education. Furthermore, it suggests that religion can help children to understand contemporary social issues and world events more fully in Canadian and other contexts, and prepare them to participate effectively and harmoniously in the multicultural, multi-faith setting of Ontario French-language schools.

The narratives of the study also show that understanding and defining involvement in education can be characterized as “unappealing” for various reasons to some Black francophone parents, because some parents hold a wide spectrum of attitudes or perceptions regarding education. Moreover, the data reveal that for Francophones of African origin there is an expectation that their involvement has to fit with what Crozier (2001) called a particular set of criteria. With his voice cracking with anger and his eyes almost filled with tears, Etienne pulled out from his bag a community newspaper that shows pictures of a Black teenager being beaten savagely. Then he says, “…as I said, sometimes I get angry because of pictures like these.” He went on:
You ask me to define involvement in my children’s education, but there is nothing to define or understand [about parental involvement in schools]. I think it is all window dressing. There is no real role for us in their [Franco-Ontarian] schools. They want us to act and do what pleases them when they need us, and disregard us when they do not [need us]. We should be talking instead of how to combat racism and marginalization and gender bias in Francophone schools.

That brings me to involvement in school and gender bias.

**Gender Bias and Involvement in School**

Gender issues seem to be a real concern for minority parents when it comes to their involvement in their children’s education. Because of societal constraints and other factors inherent to immigration, parents in the same family may not necessarily have the same viewpoint when it comes to children’s education. The husband’s involvement in the children’s education may be limited while the woman may also be faced with more with juggling household duties. Referring to her household, Janine observes that her husband’s involvement in their children’s education is, in many ways, “too little.” She further observes:

To be honest with you, my understanding of involvement may not be the same as that of my husband. For me, it means doing everything for my child. I do most of the work. Rarely my husband takes the children to school or helps them with their homework. He only drives them [children] to school when he is not working and is in the mood or his schedule allows him. Everything is left up to me. That attitude with the children’s education is frustrating and leaves me to wonder what will happen if something unfortunately strucks or incapacitates me.

Janine’s statement, “To be honest with you, I do most of the work” is a typical comment one often hears from Black Francophone women of African origin when it comes to caring about
their children’s education. For Comrad, pressure coming from all layers of society explains why some parents are unable to break away from their archaic ways in dealing with children’s education in Canada. These parents neither understand nor appreciate involvement in children’s school. Comrad went further to state, “Family head, generally the man, tends to be the most resistant to changes affecting children’s education in Canada. Neither the wife nor the husband or the community leaders have yet a real answer to that situation.”

Community Leaders

As I mentioned previously, the motivating factor in involving community leaders in this study was not to share with the researcher their knowledge about the education system, but to highlight what they do in terms of parental involvement in their children’s education in their communities, and what they understand by the term involvement in school. Community leaders in the study come from two distinct religious backgrounds, and unexpectedly none of them had a child attending a francophone school at the time of my interviews. Nonetheless, they indicate that they have some degree of understanding and familiarity with the French-language school system as well as with educational issues and social challenges facing their community members. They also share the view that schools are “more than places of learning”; they are places that can bring families and communities together to learn, connect, grow, and play. My interviews with these leaders reveal that their understanding of the system derives from their individual leadership approaches and years of experience working within their respective communities and other Francophones.

According to the interview data, community leaders share the view that education must be the number one concern for immigrant parents, especially if they want to fit in smoothly in this country, because, as Yombo puts it, “Education [must] cultivate a sense of identity within
culture and community, while working with ancestral cultural knowledge retentions.”

Community leaders understand the relevance of home, school and community partnership as well and as Yombo observed, “These partnerships can help children and their families better access the services and support they need.” In his attempt to link his thoughts with parental involvement in school, he adds that community leaders believe as well that parents’ involvement in the education of their children is a meaningful way for families and children to make a significant contribution in their country of adoption as well as in their country of origin. Similar to the parents interviewed, the three community leaders’ definition of involvement in school, the extent to which they themselves are involved in school, their strategies for involving parents, and their perceptions of parents’ understanding of the term vary. Centranze notes:

Pour moi, l’implication dans l’éducation de mes enfants signifie, grosso-modo, poser des gestes et actions en tant que parent qui vont aider l’enfant à réussir. Par exemple, inculquer à l’enfant la valeur de travailler fort dans la vie, inscrire un enfant au Taekwondo, amener l’enfant à la bibliothèque, l’aider avec ses devoirs, connaître son école, prendre une marche avec l’enfant, etc. Ces actions aident mes enfants, Canada et moi-même.

For me, involvement in my children’s education means taking actions that would help my child to succeed. That includes, for instance, instilling in the child the value of hard work, enrolling a child in Tae Kwando, taking him to the library, helping the child with his homework, knowing his school, or taking a walk with him and so on. These actions or activities help my children, Canada and me to understand one another.
Centranze’s comment raises two observations. First, it confirms the viewpoint of parents in that it considers parental involvement in school as a multi-dimensional construct, which does not necessarily fit into the traditional involvement approach. By defining parental involvement in school in terms of instilling the value of “hard word” in children, Centranze is suggesting that a child can appreciate the school and succeed academically through the medium of hard work, if the child applies him or herself to schoolwork. He is also suggesting that through hard work, children can appreciate the sacrifice that their parents do for them everyday. It is like a parent taking his child to see where her/his parents work and what type of work they do. This, in Centranze’s view has an educational component in that the child will learn how to appreciate the school. Second, Centranze’s understanding of parental involvement in school highlights the point that involvement in children’s education must not be confined to mundane daily check-up on a child’s homework. Instead, it should encompass a wide range of supports/activities that effectively help children in learning and in life. When I asked Centranze to elaborate on his strategies and degree of involvement, he said, “I do not have any specific strategy, and the depth of my involvement depends on time and other family commitments. Nonetheless, I always take the time to suggest to other parents activities that I deem would reinforce what their children learn in school. It is not how much I am involved or to what level other parents are involved, what counts is the quality of involvement and the perseverance.”

Another issue that community leaders deem of importance when defining parental involvement in school is the colonial nature through which the school system is perceived by some parents. The French-language is a colonial linguistic heritage that immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa use in their interactions with francophone institutions, including schools. Although the French-language facilitates the integration of some parents into Franco-Ontarian
society and by extension Canadian society, being conversant in French is not a guarantee for success. In other words, not all parents see the French-language as a salvation for their children’s school or for their own socio-economic well-being. For some, colonial education and schooling experience play a significant role in parents’ perception toward the school system. For example, according to Yombo, his perceptions about the school would have been quite different if he had a good schooling experience in the colonial era. Despite this, Yombo tries to anchor positively his past schooling experiences when it comes to children’s education and defining involvement in school. From his experiences, “the first thing immigrant parents inquire about is how to have their children acquire both Canada official languages, not participation in school.” This suggests the relevance of integration in Canadian society rather than parental involvement in school. His understanding of parental involvement in children’s education is summed up as follows:

Lorsqu’on définit la participation des parents dans l’éducation de leurs enfants, ce qui est très important, nous ne devrons pas reléguer aux oubliettes l’influence de ce que nous avons vécu dans notre pays. En effet, si nous pensons que nos parents nous ont bien élevé, alors il est de notre responsabilité de faire tout ce qui est en notre pouvoir pour léguer cette bonne éducation à nos enfants dans Ce pays. Ça c’est aussi de la participation dans l’éducation de nos enfants.

When defining involvement in children’s education, which is very important, we must never relegate to forgetfulness what we have experienced in our country of origin because, if we think that we were raised nicely then we must do everything we can in this country to pass on to our children the good education that was handed down to us by our parents. That too is involvement in our children’s education.
Speaking more generally, Yombo extends his definition of parental involvement in terms of real, “day-to-day” lived experiences. He sees what is happening with children in school as a way to remember the past. He elaborates, “In my view, it [involvement in children’s education] signifies also doing the best I can to ensure that my children are adjusting well here in this province. I want to find out what is happening in their daily lives. Do they have homework? Do they need help to understand specific subject areas? Can I be of any help to them? If my time allows, I suggest some other activities to my children that would reinforce what they have learned in school.”

These comments suggest that for minority groups, especially the Black francophone parents who have experienced social, political, or economic challenges prior to immigrating, the past cannot be quarantined from the present, because the past and present inform each other, and in a sense, each co-exists with the other.

Expressing himself for the first time in English, Yombo went on to underscore, “I cannot dissociate my school experiences in my country from my children’s school experiences in Ontario. Those experiences are part of me because they define my whole being. It is important to remember that our achievements today are shaped by our understanding of yesterday. This is particularly important when it comes to schools and to understanding how as a parent we help other parents to become involved in their children’s education.” Yombo offers no tangible strategies that parents can use in their bid to support their children’s education; but he echoes Centranze’s comments that what really counts is the quality of participation in education and what every parent does with their children on a regular basis.
Involvement and Children’s Upbringing

The third community leader, Sekou, whose interview was conducted entirely in English and in his native dialect, which I do understand, does not refute the viewpoints of the first two community leaders. However, since most of Sekou’s community members are Muslims, he associates parental involvement in the school with children’s religious upbringing in the family. Like Janine earlier, Sekou views the education of children and the teaching of religious beliefs as indistinguishable. According to him, they are like “two fruits from the same tree.” In a sense, education and religious teachings must complement each other in order for children to receive a complete education. He puts it this way:

In Islam, we have special ways of doing things, and if you are not Muslim, it will be hard for you to understand why we do things a certain way. Sometimes things may look a bit strange to outsiders who are not really Muslims. In terms of education, we are not very different from the other religions. It is only that we, Muslims, tend to see and define involvement in children’s education a bit differently. Muslims prepare the child to go to school in a special way; for example covering their body and dressing in certain way. It is the responsibility of a Muslim to help educate his child. Even if our children attend a public school, we [Muslims] see children’s education and our participation in it in terms of not only the child reading and writing, but also for children to recognize themselves as human beings. Most importantly, children must be able to honor the creator “God” and to worship Him. If you look at the Qur’an, the first Command or Chapter that comes to us [from God] is to ‘Read.’ Therefore, education means learning how to read, learning how to pray, learning how to communicate, learning how to talk to people, learning how to understand your religion, and learning how to respect others outside of your religion. These are the responsibilities of parents as part of their children’s education, and children need to know that. If I pass those teachings on to my children, then I can say proudly that I participate in their education.
At first, I understood Sekou as meaning to suggest that parents and children’s minds could be nurtured to block out any “detrimental effects” of materialism. However, as he talked further about educating children in the proper manner, I realized two things: First that it was not a matter of blocking out the consumerist culture, but rather of seeing things from a different perspective. In other words, it is about not taking into account the specific views that a Muslim may have about schooling / education as a whole. Second, I also realized that community leaders, and perhaps some parents, want to guide children’s lives in accordance with their religious beliefs and to create a new generation of devout Muslims. In my opinion, the quote demonstrates not only the holistic dimension of education, but also the need to have parents join, and not detach, themselves from their responsibilities toward their children’s education. Parental involvement, Sekou argues, “Is a mandatory duty that every parent should fulfil when raising her / his children.”

*Involvement: Not Fifty-Fifty*

As noted earlier, the participant data in this study reveal that parental involvement is understood from different perspectives. Sekou states that in his community some parents understand the term in relation to “Who does what” in the family. He further observes, “In traditional African societies it takes a whole village to raise a child. The whole community raises the child and the responsibilities for men and women are delineated in the process.” Returning to the subject of the interview, Sekou is less verbose as to what role each parent should exercise in the family regarding children’s education. Similarly, he says little regarding strategies that parents might play to become fully involved in their children’s education. However, he observes, “The man is generally responsible for providing family’s primary substance but is unfortunately away from home most of the time. As a result, he is also unaware of what is happening in his
family, and in the child’s school life.” For instance, he argues a child can even be sick for a few
days without the man being aware of that sickness. Even though some men may claim to
understand involvement in school and do take often their children to school in Canada, they are
not in reality part of their [children’s] formal education.” In other words, it is not a fifty-fifty
relationship when it comes to children’s education. Women are doing most of the work. Sekou
went on to state, “Attitudes of both francophone men and women of African origin are changing
in Canada. Gaps between their attitudes toward their children’s education before and after their
immigration are narrowing.” However, it is worth noting that these changes are also raising new
challenges that families had not anticipated because as Sekou stated later, “Most of the men are
now in construction, and the women are coming to understand and realize that they both must
become involved in their children’s education.”

Sekou also makes the case that Black Francophones must strive to understand and
become involved in their children’s education because their children are more and more
becoming orphans in their own home. He elucidates his statement by saying,” When both parents
are working, it is, sadly, often left to the baby sitter to go to school on behalf of the parents. As a
result, children’s academic performance suffers from the absence of their parents at a crucial
time in their learning.” This assessment of involvement in school and the role that both parents
should play stand in stark contrast with the long-held matriarchal belief that some Black
francophone men may have in their family: “men should do this and women should do that”

**Limited Level of Education**

This research reveals a relationship between understanding involvement in children’s
education and the level of education of Black francophone parents. Community leaders observe
that parents with limited education in their community are often unaware of their basic
educational rights, some of which are transmitted through government written information, the media, parents, meetings at curriculum nights, and at the school. Since most minority Black francophones parents do not visit these spaces, these parents lack knowledge to understand and appreciate their participation in their children’s schooling. Sekou argues that the lack of education and knowledge explains why the kids of many Black Francophone parents and their children are always invited to meet with school officials for issues related to their children’s performance or behavior. Because of parents’ limited education, they rarely, if ever, attend school functions, and know little about the education system or the significance of the different stages of their children’s education, and tend to leave educational decisions to school and their children, which is most unfortunate, if not disturbing for the children’s schooling and academic progress.

Centranze, on the other hand, offers a different opinion regarding parents’ limited education. He states, “In spite of the fact that some parents of former French African colonies are unlettered, and school principals and teachers are authority figures trained to make the best decisions for their children's academic progress, parents should be involved in their children’s education.” He goes on to argue that, “…for parents’ understanding of their involvement in their children’s education, even if they are not well educated, the first thing to do is to enroll their children in one of the French-language schools. It is important to maintain the French-language as a cultural language, to ensure that children maintain the francophone culture in Ontario.”

From follow-up conversations with community leaders, it is my opinion that minority parents' motivational beliefs about involvement in school, their perceptions of invitations from educators to become involved in their children’s education, and their understanding that they must first adapt to their new society, all affect their decision to become involved in their
children’s education. Yombo recognizes that parents play a crucial role in their children’s school life and think that the onus is on parents to “familiarize themselves first [with the education system] before participating in school.” This means being able to overcome bewilderment at the school system, policies, and rules, and to understand such things as testing and learning strategies taking place.

Without knowing the society and the education system, certain parents within the community are bound to misunderstand their new role and responsibilities as parents regarding their children. Centranze explains:

Il y a des gens dans la communauté qui sont frustrés pour une raison ou pour une autre. Ces gens contaminent les autres avec leurs mauvaises expériences avec l’école ou dans la société. Il y a peu de chose que je peux faire pour ces gens car on ne peut aider quelqu’un que si cette personne est prête à te faire part de ses ennuis. Malheureusement ça c’est une face cachée qui explique pourquoi certaines personnes ne veulent pas faire d’efforts pour participer à l’école. There are people in my community who are frustrated for one reason or another. They keep their frustrations bottled up inside and contaminate others with whatever bad experiences they are having or have had with the school or the society. I cannot do much with these kinds of people. You help someone only if you know what bothers that person. Sadly, this is a serious but unacknowledged reason why some people do not make any effort to reach out to schools.
**Teachers**

Teachers’ perception of how Black francophone parents understand involvement in their children’s education is also important in this study. The accounts from teachers highlight why Francophones of African origin and teachers need to coordinate their efforts to prevent children’s failure. Moreover, these perspectives help us to understand why parents and teachers’ perceive each other as being uncaring towards children (Lighfoot, 1978).

Within education policy and parental involvement discourses, there is an implicit assumption that the responsibility of initiating parental involvement, in whatever form this may take, lies with the parents. The schools in this research were no exception and the teachers I interviewed recognize the importance of minority parents’ involvement in schools. A few of the teachers even encourage involvement in school as a form of democratic exercise. At the same time, teachers share the view that scores of Black parents whose children attend their schools do not understand that they have a role to play in their children’s education. In the teachers’ opinion, some parents are difficult to reach and it is not easy to get them to become engaged in their children’s education.

The four teachers interviewed view parental involvement in school primarily as parents helping them with their schoolwork. They mostly equate parental involvement in school with the frequency of parents’ presence in school that is, how often parents participate in school-based activities, which can include, among others, accompanying the teacher on field trips and staffing a booth at school games. Diougrand states:

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Le premier point sur lequel je m’appesanti c’est de voir que le parent vienne voir le travail de...
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In terms of parental involvement in school, the first point for me is to have the
Like the narratives of other teachers, Diougrand’s understanding of involvement is limited, in fact, to a “wish list” of what a teacher wants parents to do. He offers no strategies on how to have parents become involved.

Ondiquoi, a veteran teacher of 18 years, spoke along similar lines, “When I see a parent in school, I say to myself yes, this parent is involved and concerned about the child’s education. Parents can do something for children to succeed. Taking note of my comments on the report card and getting in touch with me are signs that a parent is paying attention to the child.”

Teachers’ roles regarding involvement of minority parents have been underscored elsewhere (Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 1997). These authors have argued eloquently that
teachers’ efforts to create inviting environments for parental involvement are paramount for parental involvement in schools. Epstein et al. (2002) have found that parents were most involved when teachers actively encouraged involvement and that stronger teacher involvement practices were positively related to higher reading achievement among children.

Teachers make an association between what they perceive as Black francophone parents’ understanding or misunderstanding of involvement in their children’s education with their lack of involvement in government legislated parents / school councils. Bellhumeur sums up the viewpoint about the relationship between school councils and Black francophone parents.

...Ces parents ne comprennent pas l’importance de s’impliquer dans les conseils d’école / parents. Les parents doivent s’impliquer [dans les conseils d’école / parents] car c’est là où sont prises les décisions touchant le fonctionnement de l’école et d’autres aspects affectant leurs enfants. Même si le conseil d’école / parent ne joue qu’un rôle de conseiller, c’est un important endroit où les parents peuvent faire des suggestions qu’ils veulent voir implanter à l’école.

...These parents do not understand the importance of becoming involved in school / parents councils. Parents must be involved in them [school councils] because this is where decisions about the functioning of the school and other things affecting their children are put on the table. Although school councils have advisory role only, it is an arena where parents can make suggestions and argue about school issues they want to see implemented in the school.

Although the home is often viewed as the primary support place for children, it is worth noting that teachers’ perceptions of minority parents’ involvement in school needs to be
genuinely coupled with support to both minority parents and children who come to school with a set of values that often differ from that of the teachers and the system. Children exploit their parents’ trust if they perceive that there is no collaboration between their teachers and the parents. Patricia observes:

Beaucoup de parents ne comprennent pas leur rôle. Néanmoins, il faut qu’ils fassent un suivi auprès de leurs enfants. Ce suivi est important car il faut savoir que les enfants sont des manipulateurs. Malheureusement, beaucoup de parents ne sont pas conscients de cela. Les parents et les enseignants doivent travailler en ensemble pour éviter que les enfants ne passent les emails des filets. C’est en collaborant que les nouveaux arrivants peuvent comprendre leur rôle dans l’éducation de leurs enfants.

Many parents do not understand their role; nevertheless, they must pay attention to their children’s schoolwork, because children can be manipulative. Unfortunately, not all parents are mindful of that. Parents and teachers must work together to prevent children from duping parents. It is by collaborating that newcomer parents can understand their roles and responsibilities with respect to their children’s education.

While some teachers acknowledge that children with differing cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are marginalized within French-language educational institutions, others are quick to recognize that teachers’ understanding of the significance of racial parents’ involvement in school must not be blurred by other individual and systemic practices. Ondiquoi says:
Il est vrai qu’il y a des parents [immigrants] qui travaillent fort mais qui s’en fichent éperdument de ce que leurs enfants font ou ne font pas à l’école. Il est aussi vrai qu’il y a des parents qui ont une attitude de laisser-faire en ce qui concerne l’avenir de leurs propres enfants. Il a une autre réalité qui est celle de nos comportements individuels qui n’encouragent pas ces parents à comprendre ou à participer à l’éducation de leurs enfants. Après tout, plusieurs dans cette société ne sont pas encore prêts ou ne veulent pas accepter leurs propres préjugés lorsqu’il s’agit de composer avec des gens d’autres groupes raciales.

It is true that there are out there hardworking parents who do not care at all about what their children are doing or are not doing in school. It is also true that many parents have “I don’t care” attitude for their own children’s future. However, the cold reality is that our own individual behavior towards these parents is not helping them to understand or become involved in school activities. After all, in this society many are still not ready or willing to come to terms with their own bias when dealing with other racial people.

This quote illustrates that some teachers are cognizant of their own role regarding the involvement of Black francophone parents. The quote also recognizes that racial bias is alive when it comes to perceptions toward racial minority parents. In addition, Ondiquoi is suggesting that the role of school boards must go beyond assigning a classroom to a teacher; that school boards must address other critical issues that Black francophone parents face and which hinder their full participation in school.
In summary, the teachers I interviewed in this research study recognized the importance of parental involvement for Black Francophones of African origin, but also believe that parents’ understanding of their role in their children’s education varies because of several reasons, including negative perceptions within society. Teachers believe that it is incumbent on parents to become involved in their children’s education, despite the fact that not all of them understand or appreciate the significance of involvement. The form and extent of involvement, according to teachers, is primarily defined in relation to parents’ support of school-run activities.

Summary

This chapter explored the understanding of the meaning that Black francophone parents give to the term “involvement in school.” Furthermore, it answers these questions: What strategies, if any, do they employ in their involvement, and to what extent they are involved? What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of Black Francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s formal education?

The chapter focused on the data analysis obtained from the interviews with eight parents, three community leaders and four teachers. As a result, this chapter confirmed many of the findings of previous studies involving racial parents. At the same time, it challenged discursive / hegemonic understandings of parent involvement in their children’s education. Specifically, the chapter reveals that parents, community leaders and teachers’ definition of parental involvement in children’s education differs. In spite of differing views in defining and strategizing parental involvement in schools, Black francophone parents who participated in this study have high expectations for their children. The data reveal that these parents tend to define involvement in school in terms of their own school experience in their countries of origin, or in terms of
cumulative negative experience they have had (or continue to have) with the French-language education system.

More often than not, parents are likely to see involvement in terms of lack of cultural integration that characterizes the French-language schools. Parents perceive cultural integration as an integral element that requires “reciprocal understanding between the school and the immigrant parent.” For some parents, involvement in school is a shared responsibility between the school, the community and the educators. For others, involvement in school is understood as a fundamental basic responsibility for every parent. This responsibility underscores that parental involvement in school be defined holistically, because as Janine states, “Parents and children develop a deep reciprocal love and understanding of each other when the school is not considered as the only place for learning.” Although parents have various ways of understanding and defining involvement in their children’s education, this study reveals that they do not have any strategies and are, at best, minimally involved in their children’s formal education.

Unsurprisingly, school and government’s policies are equally found to influence the perceptions of Black francophone parents regarding their children’s education. Whether the school’s policies are specifically geared toward minority parents or toward the general parent population, some Black francophone parents seem oblivious of the benefits of parental involvement in school. This, in my view, sets the stage for miscommunication between the school and the parent.

It is important to note that while parents define involvement differently, the data reveals that their strategies for involvement and the extent to which they are involved are rather poor. The parents’ inability to describe clearly their strategies and degree of involvement suggests that they are unaware, unconcerned or even uncommitted about the importance of laying out
strategies to support their children’s education. More often than not, the parents in this study view and define involvement in terms of expectations that they have of the school system. The data also suggest that parents tend to define and perceive involvement in their children’s education strictly in terms of their own school experiences.

This study also reveals that the role of community leaders is to identify needs and concerns, and to provide vision and guidance to community members. Community leaders in this study have some understanding of the French-language educational system and see the value of parental involvement in their children’s education in a highly similar way, even if parents are illiterate or do not understand first hand how to navigate the system. While the community leaders are cognizant of their community and leadership responsibilities, they often lack resources to help their members become involved in their children’s education. These leaders are also aware that some parents need help to become involved in their children’s education, and others simply must first educate themselves about the French language school system and Canadian society in general. Community leaders believe that parents’ cultural upbringing and their educational formative years shape the way they perceive and understand involvement in their children’s education. Some of the participants are of the view that their understanding of their role in their children’s education cannot be detached from their own upbringing and spiritual yearning.

The data analysis of teachers’ account reveals that educators define parents’ involvement in school in a narrow way. For those teachers, and particularly the two Black francophone teachers, parental involvement in school has a double meaning. First, it is to help teachers in school-related activities during school hours, and then to call teachers as often as possible to inquire about their children. For teachers, many Black francophone parents either do not
understand involvement in school or are simply too preoccupied with other societal issues that prevent them from becoming involved in their children’s education.

While teachers are more concerned about parents’ physical presence in school and school-related activities, parents seem comfortable to leave their children’s education in the hand of educators, as they themselves experienced before immigrating to Canada. Accounts of the study’s participants demonstrate that teachers and community leaders, too, do not have any strategies to get parents involved in their children’s education.

This chapter on the research participants’ understanding of, strategies and extent of involvement in their children’s education sets the stage for the next chapter, which focuses on factors (perceived or real) that inhibit or prevent Black francophone parents from effectively becoming involved in their children’s education.
Despite the passionate and often unrealistic dreams of Black parents, teachers continue to view them as uncaring, unsympathetic and ignorant of the value of education for their children and unconcerned about their children’s academic success in school. Often, they perceive the parent lack of involvement in ritualistic school events and parent conferences as apathy and disinterest and rarely interpret it as the inability to negotiate the bureaucratic maze of schools or as a response to a long history of exclusion and rejection at the school door....

Parents and teachers’ perceptions of each other as uncaring about children and as devaluing the education process lead to distance and distrust and the need to blame one another. Misconceptions, rarely articulated and confronted, always nurtured by hostile stereotypes, lead to increasing disregard for each other’s place in the lives of Black children. Rather than search for the origins of conflict and find effective strategies for real (rather than contrived) participation of parents and teachers in a collaborative task, schools develop more sophisticated of exclusion; parents farther and farther away from parental responsibilities in the schooling process, and children fail. (Lightfoot, 1978, pp. 166 – 167)

Introduction

Most schools, on the surface at least, would argue that they welcome parents’ input; that they are, for the most part, relatively comfortable with parents becoming involved in schools to monitor their children's achievement and to support the program by assisting with homework and projects (Vandegrift & Greene, 1992). Yet, when you ask parents, especially ethnic / minority parents, about their involvement in their children’s education, you quickly realize that their involvement in their children’s education is open to discussion, and that several factors contribute to their failure to become engaged in their children’s education. Taking into account the perspectives of francophone parents of African origin, and knowing that the human being is directly influenced by that of which he or she is taught, exposed to, or given, this chapter will examine barriers that Black francophone parents face with respect to involvement in their children’s education in two publicly funded French language schools. The chapter answers the
following research question: What inhibits or facilitates the participation of Black francophone parents in their children’s schooling?

Like in the previous chapter, participants’ answers are captured according to three sets of perspectives: parents, community leaders and teachers. I have grouped in chart key barriers that each participant group identified, and have expanded on those barriers for each of the research’s three constituents: parents, community leaders, and teachers.

**Parents**

Research indicates that school personnel believe that minority parents (especially ethnic, cultural and racial minorities) fail to participate in their children’s schools in significant numbers, do not volunteer in school fund-raising activities, nor attend parent advisory council meetings, or attend parent-teacher conferences (McCollum, 1996). There is a blanket assumption that all parents are the same, with the same needs, and that their children can be treated in the same way. These perceptions and assumptions obfuscate the importance of tackling the nature and consequences of various forms of barriers that minority parents face within and outside the school boundaries. Descriptive barriers that emerged from a content analysis of this research data, and which sometimes overlap, include but are not limited to, the following: societal barriers, school-related barriers, barriers deriving from government legislations, colonial education, psychological barriers and barriers arising from the perceived inaction of community leaders. Table 6 summarizes the key barriers identified by the parents.
## Table 6

**Key Barriers Identified by Parents**

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<th>Thematic spheres</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
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<td>Societal barriers</td>
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<td>• Social agencies</td>
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<td>• Perceived inaction of community leaders</td>
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Using the participant’s own words, these barriers are described as follows.

### Societal Barriers

Ontario in general and large urban centres in particular, continues to be the destination of choice for many new Francophone immigrants from Africa. Most children of these families attend a French language school, where they are exposed to social and cultural integration issues associated with immigration in a new society. Parents in this research point out four major
societal barriers, which are encapsulated under the headings of inversion of roles in families in Canada, role of social agencies, social exclusion, and racial discrimination.

**Inversion of Roles**

Traditional roles of men and women in most African societies are clearly delineated and viewed as sacrosanct. In Africa, both the head of the family (usually the man) and the woman, know their respective roles and responsibilities regarding the family. Any attempts to alter long-held beliefs and practices in how children are raised, educated, and cared for, can have negative consequences on relationships between the wife and husband in the family. A few parents in this research mention that role reversal in families, between the man and the woman, often laid the foundation for tension and disenchantment that prevented them from becoming involved in their children’s education. Comrad gives his viewpoint on how the inversion of roles between Black francophone men and women affects involvement in children’s education:

...Quand ils [l’homme et la femme] arrivent ici au Canada, le père continue de croire qu’il aura plus de chance d’avoir un emploi, et que la femme aura moins de chance. Ils sont surpris qu’à leur arrivée ici, il faut passer par la reconnaissance des diplômes, et leurs expériences de travail. Soudain, le père réalise une réduction dans son rôle de chef de famille parce que désormais il doit amener et aller chercher les enfants à l’école,

...When they [the man and the woman] immigrate to Canada, the head of the family continues to believe that he will still have a better chance for employment than the woman will. Both are surprised to learn that their credentials and work experiences, acquired prior to immigrating to Canada, are not recognized by Canadian society. [The woman usually finds work before her
chauffer le café ou le repas pour les enfants, demander parfois de l’argent à sa femme qui contrairement à lui n’a pas eu de grande difficulté à se décrocher une petite jobine. Puisque l’homme n’est pas psychologiquement préparé à jouer un tel rôle, les frictions s’installent et conduisent souvent au divorce avec les conséquences néfastes sur le soutien à l’éducation des enfants.

The head of the family is also surprised that he now has to take the children to and from their school; that he has to prepare their lunch; that he has to ask his wife for spending money. Given the fact that the man has not been psychologically prepared for this reversal in role, he realizes suddenly that his status in the house has been significantly diminished. As a result, there is ongoing friction between the couple, which eventually leads to unfortunate consequences, such as divorce [tension and alienation between the wife and husband]. All of these negatively affect parents’ support and involvement in their children’s education.

As stated, the lack of psychological preparation of new immigrants in dealing with new realities and roles inherent to immigration in a new society is often accompanied by tension in the family. In most African countries where both the man and woman have their respective role in the society clearly defined and where the head of family, generally the man, is the financial
pursuer of money and other necessities the family depends on daily. Unlike in Africa, once in Canada both parents are forced to deal with several new realities pertaining to the education of their children. In Comrad’s words, “Those realities lead men to change their attitude about children’s education.”

Social Agencies

The role of social agencies is related to barriers to parental involvement in school. In other words, social agencies, including immigration and employment agencies, influence the way Black francophone parents view their participation in school. The fact that social agencies often advise people, including immigrant women and children, to report their loved ones to public authorities, such as police and children’s aid societies, if they perceive themselves to be threatened or at risk puts a strain on the relationships that family members have with each other. Moriba observes that, “It is unfathomable [and contradictory], frustrating and sometimes disturbing that the government wants us in schools, but at the same time it tramps on what we fundamentally value as Africans; the [school] system essentially teaches our women and children how to turn against us.” In the same vein, Etienne also puts it this way, “It is against everything I value when they [authorities] tell us in front of our wife and children that we must conduct ourselves in accordance with certain standards. This is a recipe for negative relationships between the father, the wife and the [children]. It does not help children’s education and their emotional growth.” This quote indicates that parents want their children to be educated; however, they also want the school to stay out of their family lives. Furthermore, it suggests both families’ values and Canadian standards should command equal respect regarding Black parents’ involvement in their children’s education.
School Barriers

School is a microcosm of the larger society as well as a place where, because of racism, ethnicism, classism, and xenophobia, some bodies are read as intelligent and belonging while others are constructed as “others.” (James, 2007, p. 31)

One of the most often cited barriers to involvement in children’s education by the respondents are those related to the school. According to the eight respondent parents, the main school-related barriers include racial discrimination, school stakeholders, communication between the school and parents, marginalization of children in the school, and the teaching approach in schools.

Racial discrimination.

Race is a socio-political construct, but it is also real in terms of material consequences (Dei, 1996). Race is as much a reality as class and gender and it is one of the multiple social identities that students bring with them into their educational school experiences. All the eight parents interviewed mention systemic, yet subtle, racism that abounds alongside school diversity. Despite schools portraying themselves as being culturally aware, and may even recognize, though not celebrate, religious days such as Diwali, Rosh Hashanah, Eid El Fitr and so on, Black francophone parents believe that different layers of discriminations based on race exist in French-language schools. Lajoie observes, “There are all sort of ‘isms’ happening in the school, which prevent many parents from becoming involved in their children’s education. There are always White parents of the same community with the same ideologies, viewpoints, and goals, who control the school, and whose agenda is always taken into account by [the school principal’s] office. That’s the case of White parents from the xxxx province.” This marginalization based on skin colour, is also indicative of the negative perception (or rejection) for the immigrant parents when they attempt to become involved in their children’s education.
Racial discriminatory practices have led parents to take counter measures such as opting for alternative schooling for their children. Lajoie observes, “There are parents who have chosen to home school their children. Children of these parents that I know of appear to be calmer and less stressed.” Whether or not this statement is applicable to all Black francophone parents, it is indicative of the malaise that parents experience with the school in their bid to ensure that their children realize their educational and social aspirations. Lajoie’s observation is echoed in Levy (2009). In the same vein, Moriba espouses Lajoie’s comments, and explains why he is no longer involved in school-based activities in French language schools:

Actuellement je ne suis plus impliqué comme parent bénévole à l’école parce que je n’aime pas l’atmosphère [de l’école], la manière que ça fonctionne. On fait trop de discrimination à l’école. Je te donne un exemple : L’année dernière il y a eu une soirée à l’école et les parents africains qui étaient impliqués dans l’organisation de la soirée en question n’ont même pas été remerciés par la direction de l’école. Cependant, les parents blancs qui étaient bénévoles aussi ont été invités à la fin de l’année par le conseil de parents et la direction de l’école pour un dîner. Cela a touché les I am no longer involved in the school’s voluntary activities because I do not like the school’s atmosphere, the way it operates. There is a lot of discrimination in the school. I give you an example: Last year, there was a show at the school and African parents who were involved in the organization of the show did not receive even a thank-you from the school. However, at the end of school year, members of the parents’ council and the school principal invited White parents who had also volunteered for a dinner. This offended Black parents who volunteered. They were upset. In reaction to this
autres parents noirs qui avaient aidé l’école. Ils n’ont pas aimé cela. En réaction à ce traitement de l’école, un des parents a même retiré son enfant de cette école et la amener dans une école Anglophone. Je ne pense pas que ces parents et d’autres parents qui vont avoir écho de ce traitement seront encore intéressés à s’impliqués dans les activités de l’école. En tant que parent, une fois que je suis victime d’une telle discrimination flagrante, je n’ai plus la motivation ni le courage de participer aux activités de l’école. Je ne suis la le seul sur ce point.

experience, one of the Black parents withdrew his child and sent him to an Anglophone school. I do not think that those parents and other [Black] parents who might have heard about this treatment would be interested in participating in any further organized activity at this school. As a parent, after experiencing such deliberate racial discrimination, I am no longer motivated, nor do I have the courage to participate in the school’s activities. I am not the only one who feels this way.

Janine sees racism as the root of many things in schools and in the society, and as she argues, “Those who are born and raised here understand the dynamics between home and school. However, for many of us [Black francophone parents], it is like putting the cart before the horse. School should first make an effort to understand the parents culturally and socially before parents become involved.” In Janine’s view, school fails its primary responsibility in that it counts minority parents and sees their physical’s presence as the only thing that matters. The teachers’ accounts in this study later in this chapter confirm this assertion. According to Janine, the school
would be better off if it fully understood that, “Racism is what prevents many of parents from getting involved in their children’s school at the first place.” Later, Janine went on to argue:

True, everyone wants the best education for his child, because education is what can save us [immigrants]; it can also unite us. However, when race and immigrant status matter in schools, then education can keeps us apart from each other. For example, my attempt to get involved in the school 2 years ago was met by a racial rejection. When I put forth my name as a school trustee candidate, I was told that someone would contact me later. Even though the board was looking for a volunteer to apply for this position, the board never attempted to contact me despite several phone calls I made to inquire about my earlier application to become a school trustee. Since then, I decided not to bother any more, because I feel unwelcomed by the school. How can you learn to dance if you are not being invited to dance?

Racial discrimination and other forms of preferential treatment in schools can be associated with parents’ country of origin, and can be manifested in situations that commonly call for empathy. According to one of the respondents, school personnel in French-language schools are often cold and sometime disrespectful to minority parents. Moriba explains, “When a Black child is involved in an altercation with a child of the dominant group, the parents of the Black child are frequently blamed for the child’s behavior, because the school staff tend to perceive these parents as uneducated and poor.” Black francophone parents also believe that the school personnel treat their counterpart White parents better and with more respect. An illustration of such a treatment, according to another respondent, Doucette, is the tone some Francophone school personnel employ when, for example, they call a parent to pick up his child who has fallen sick at school. From Doucette’s perspective, the school always insists that minority parents pick up their child right away, and meanwhile it offers the parents of the
dominant group the option to pick up their sick child when they can. She says, “We are routinely asked questions such as: “Do you work? How long it would take you to get to school and pick up your child?” Doucette went on and told her experience:

On one occasion I received a call from the school to pick up my sick child and when I tried to find out what was happening, the secretary told me to ‘tone down my voice…you people are too loud.’ I just want you to come over right now and get your kid.” This secretary literally disrespected me and treated me as if I am a stupid person, someone who is unemployed and who does not know anything about the school. If this was my only experience, it would not have bothered me so much, but I experienced a similar embarrassment 2 years back. On that occasion, I was told in front of other parents and children to ‘behave’ [within the norms of the school] like everybody else or take my child elsewhere.

For other parents, the question of racial discrimination in the French-language education system is at the core of the home-school relationship. Janine contends that, “Discrimination is at the core of many problems in the school. Everything is about race. Schools want us to see things in a Eurocentric way. They want our children to think that way. Meanwhile, they blatantly ignore that the learning environment is inappropriate, that our children are screaming for help, that doors are shut in our face, that our dreams are being shattered. For god’s sake, how can parents be of help for their children in these conditions?”

These two accounts illustrate that because of the historical legacy of racism and discrimination in schools (Laureau & Horvat, 1999), some Black parents of African origin find it difficult, if not impossible, to fully adhere to all the institutional expectations. In essence, parents and their children alike find it difficult to negate their cultural heritage in the name of conforming to school norms. Other parents are simply not in a position to become involved in
their children’s education while they are experiencing social adjustments, defining, and in certain cases consolidating, their existence in both the dominant English society and the French language society.

In other cases, parents fail to become involved in school’s activities because they do not recognize their children in those activities. As Toufasson put it, “Parents tend to withdraw from school’s cultural activities that do not ‘speak’ to them.” In other words, parents do not participate in school activities if they cannot relate to these activities. This is especially true for Moriba, who notes that immigrant parents of his child’s school always attend cultural activities involving ethno-cultural group, such as “Jacko-Backo,” a well-known dance group from Cameroon, Central Africa. He elaborates:

Un jour, l’école [de mon enfant] a fait une activité et a fait venir le groupe « Jacko-Backo ». Beaucoup de parents immigrants sont venus à cette soirée car ils voyaient les valeurs culturelles Africaines présentées dans les acteurs et les danses du groupe. Une soirée pareille qui avait été organisée plus tôt où on avait fait venir un magicien Blanc pour amuser les élèves n’a pas donné les mêmes résultats. Nos parents ne sont pas venus car ils ne se voyaient pas représenter.

One day, my child’s school invited “Jacko-Backo” to play. Many immigrant parents attended the show because they identified with the group, “Jacko-Backo.” A similar event that took place earlier and in which a White performer was invited did not attract so many people. Our parents did not come because they did not see themselves represented.
Unlike events that are performed by White entertainers in the school, this comment suggests that immigrant parents are more responsive to school’s activities when they see their cultures incorporated. Moriba further points out that, “Racism can be openly displayed in racial jokes and slurs or hate crimes, and can be deeply rooted in attitudes, values and stereotypical beliefs.” Hence, it can be argued that given the various ways in which racism and racial discrimination play out in society, many Black francophone parents will continue to keep their distance from French-language schools.

Doucette corroborates Moriba’s point and notes:

…once, after seeing racial graffiti in my kid’s school and overheard someone saying the “N” word and laughing, I reported it to the school principal, and wrote a letter rising concerns about the safety of the schoolchildren and the need to install cameras. The school called in the police about the incident; however, no action was taken, and I did not receive any feedback either. This kind of attitude from the school demonstrates lack of concerns and sensitivity towards other minority children.

From the parents’ vantage, this account reinforces the feeling that there is no use complaining to the authorities regardless of scars that the discriminatory actions leave on Black Francophones. This account also implies that immigrant parents, especially Black francophone parents, are inclined to make complain against their children’s school.

**Marginalization.**

To examine what hinders Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s education is also to talk about marginalization of Black francophone parents in French-language schools. Iris Marion Young (1990) has argued that “marginalization is perhaps the most
dangerous form of oppression” (p. 53), and I would add that this is because marginalization reinforces invisibility. As I noted, even if many racial minority parents are not visibly present in their children’s schools, they are still faced with marginalization based on their language and race. Therefore, I argue that marginalization further contributes to their non-involvement in the school, leads to negative response from parents because it blocks them from the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined ways. Marginalization subjects Black francophone parents to the often arbitrary and invasive authority of school officials, especially when parents are asked by school officials to provide information about their children. Marginalization that Black francophones face, and which will be discussed later, comes from both the French-language schools as well as the Anglophone society.

Barriers related to marginalization can lead Black francophone parents to take reactive measures such as withdrawing their child from the school. Kankou, for example, notes, “You know, I am thinking of sending my children back to Africa because they are always marginalized and ostracized in the school and for me they are not learning anything, and I feel that they do not fit in. To say the least, I am disappointed by the system that has no discipline.” This signifies that Black francophones are increasingly becoming annoyed with marginalization. Whether it comes from their children’s school or from the Franco-Ontarian society, parents view it as being victimized. In the same vein, Janine echoes Kankou’s comment about school discipline to highlight the marginalization of Black children in the school system. She contends that, “Schools, especially French-language ones, disproportionately discipline [Black] children more than the other children. Our kids are being ‘pushed out’ of school with the new discipline [policy] in the school.” This signifies that schools, which are regarded as important agencies for the inculcation of social attitudes and behaviors are neither innocent nor neutral when it comes to
dealing with their student population. It also means that perceived or real disciplinary actions that Black schoolchildren are, or may be, subjected to lead some parents to become uninterested in school-based activities. Those parents may feel that attending school activities could lead to embarrassment once they were identified and associated with their children’s behaviour. Kankou’s use of disproportionate representation of Black children regarding schools’ disciplinary actions indicates that parents are concerned, and the question to be asked regarding discipline in school is, whose interest is served when Black children are expelled or suspended from school? The answer to this question is “the dominant group” because White people can use suspensions and expulsions of Black children to argue that Black parents are unconcerned with their children’s education.

*Educational stakeholders.*

As stakeholders, parents, communities and educators all have a significant role to play in children’s education. These stakeholders, however, are often quick to blame each other for failure of parents’ involvement in schools. Some of the parents in this study emphasize the need for support from the Ministry of Education. At the same time, other parents blame the Ministry for their non-involvement in their children’s school. Lajoie observes, “How can you be involved in these [French language] schools when you know fully well that there are so few Black teachers, with so many of our children? To have parents become involved in the school means that parents and children have to see teachers with whom they can identify. However, the current school structure polarizes parents and teachers due to a lack of effective communication, Black representation, inclusiveness, and collaborative relationship among the stakeholders, particularly with parents of African origin.” Parents would more likely feel comfortable coming to school and have contact with their children’s teachers if these conditions were met.” Similarly, Janine
observes, “Our attitude towards the school is a direct reaction to what we perceive as a lack of interest on the part of the school administration and the Ministry of Education.” On this basis, it can be interpreted that both the school and the Ministry do not fully understand Black parents.

In some respondents’ perspectives, the aforementioned stakeholders are even complicit in not helping them. There are parents who cannot separate their perceptions of their involvement in school from the role that they think the Ministry should play to facilitate this involvement. Kankou observes that, “It is better not to count on the Ministry, because regardless of what I do, it will not be recognized or appreciated by the school and the Ministry. In fact, usually the school will only call a Black parent like me if my daughters do something wrong. You do not get a call from the school until your child does something wrong; that means that your presence at the school is not important. What is important for the school is to see you come fix your child’s problems. They want you to keep your eye on your sons and daughters, and make sure they abide by the school regulations and expectations. Schools are too European, but I am not European, I am an African.”

Communication.

Barriers to the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education are not restricted to the aforementioned impediments. This research also reveals the lack of communication between parents and their children’s schools as a serious gulf in French-language schools. Although none of the parents elaborates on the extent to which their children’s schools fail to maintain an open communication line with them, it was quite apparent during the interviews that all the parents have experienced one way or another some discomfort when they tried to reach out to the schools. Etienne recognizes the lack of communication and the frustration parents experience with the school system. However, when asked to cite instances
when he felt frustrated because he could not speak to an educator, he replied by posing these questions: “Why must Black francophone parents become involved in Francophone schools when those schools are not reaching out to them? Why become involved if issues that are crucial [to Black] parents are not dealt with?” According to him, issues that are educationally urgent are usually shined by the lack of adequate representation of Blacks in French-language school boards. Referring to the lack of communication within the school council of his children’s school, Lajoie also comments, “There is a sort of silence between parents and the school. For instance, there is no contact list of parents in the school. Even though parents have repeatedly asked for such a list, the school always answered that it is against both the Ministry and the school's policies.” Parents may interpret this type of response as a way for the school not to answer criticism from some parents, especially from those of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some parents may also think that the school is simply afraid that parents may use such a list to contact each other and commiserate on their disaffection with the way the school treats minority parents and their children. As a result, this may affect the relationship between parents and senior school officials. Further, Lajoie elaborated on the issue of lack of communication between parents and the school council:

...Ça fait quatre ans que ma fille est à l’école mais je ne connais pas les coordonnées de ses amis de classes et des parents du conseil d’école. Ce qui fait que si elle perd sa feuille de dictée par exemple, je ne connais personne pour appeler. Je pense qu’ils [school officials] ont peur ...

...It has been 4 years since my daughter has been attending this school, but I still do not know the contacts of her friends or the parents in the school parent council. Because of that, I cannot contact anyone if she were to lose, for example,
As implied in Lajoie’s comment, the lack of communication between parents and the school council or the school officials can be frustrating for many Black francophone parents. For parents who are new in the country and therefore to the school system, being able to speak directly to a school administrator or to an educator can be comforting since these parents have no previous reference points.

**School leadership.**

Leadership in school needs to be about deeper moral purposes like social justice (Ryan, 2006, p. 3). Educating the whole school community about inclusive issues is important because administrators, teachers, students, and parents, particularly those in more diverse settings, generally know little about each other, about exclusive practices such as racism, and how to approach and implement inclusive practices (p. 10). These statements are true, when you consider that leadership in French-language schools know little of their communities. Since the voices of [Black francophones immigrant] parents are missing on leadership teams and committees that make decisions on policies about budget, curriculum, safety, parent outreach, and staffing (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Ramirez, 2003), this makes it difficult for these parents to be involved in the school system. This often means that the needs of immigrant children and families are not taken into account when decisions that affect them are made. Lajoie
notes, “Enticing minority parents to become involved in school would be easier if the school leadership were welcoming and strive to know us.” Comrad adds, “The school leadership is responsible for hiring school staff. Unfortunately, the same leadership fails to realize that [discriminatory] hiring practices that limit Black francophone immigrants’ access to teaching [in francophone schools]. As a result, this contributes to the non-participation of some parents who do not see themselves represented in the teaching staff.”

The problem of school leadership also raises another thorny, but important issue, which Comrad refers to later as “institutional insensitivity and lack of responsiveness” of school leaders toward minority parents’ concerns. Although Black parents generally share the view that school leaders care less for their concerns, they also recognize that the same leaders can provide them with support in a number of significant ways, including training teachers and staff to recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds and needs of family members. Parents also believe that a school leader can encourage minority parent families to become involved in school through home visits.

**Government Barriers**

*Section 23¹*

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¹ Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* gives constitutional guarantees for official minority language educational rights to French-speaking communities outside Quebec, and, to English speaking minorities in Quebec. Under the heading "Minority Language Educational Rights," the section reads:

23. (1) Citizens of Canada
(a) whose first language learned and still understood is that of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province in which they reside, or

(b) who have received their primary school instruction in Canada in English or French and reside in a province where the language in which they received that instruction is the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province, have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in that language in that province.
This study reveals that some francophone parents of African origin see Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as an impediment, or at least problematic, when it comes to involvement in francophone schools. According to the respondents, the constitutional protection under the *Section 23* is not aimed at Black Francophones for whom the French language is neither the first language learned nor the language in which they receive their primary education in Canada. The parents in this study argue that only White Francophones from other provinces and European countries gain from *Section 23*. The perception is that due to their skin colour, Black francophone parents have to go through a series of meetings with school officials before their children can be admitted in school. The respondents also note that there are many non-Canadian racialized children for whom access to the official language minority instruction is not often guaranteed. In Etienne and Toufasson’s view, “Black Francophones perceive themselves as second-class citizens within the Franco-Ontarian society, under the constitutional protection of *Section 23*, and unless more inclusive measures are taken to remedy this problem, many more new and long-established parents will continue to perceive this section as an obstacle to their involvement in school.” This view will continue to persist even though the *Education Act* of Ontario allows parents who do not meet the criteria set out in

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(2) Citizens of Canada of whom any child has received or is receiving primary or secondary school instruction in English or French in Canada have the right to have all their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the same language.

(3) The right of citizens of Canada under subsections (1) and (2) to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of a province 

(a) applies wherever in the province the number of children of citizens who have such a right is sufficient to warrant the provision to them out of public funds of minority language instruction; and 

(b) includes, where the number of those children so warrants, the right to have them receive that instruction in minority language educational facilities provided out of public funds.
Section 23 of the Charter to have their children admitted in a French-language school if they receive permission from the school's admissions committee. The problem with admission committees is that they are generally made up of individuals who have no connections with the immigrant parents. As a result, the committee’s decision is heavily weighted against these parents.

School curriculum.

The new Ontario curriculum was designed to provide all elementary / secondary students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed when they leave school. The implementation of the new curriculum has created new educational challenges, however, especially for new Black francophone immigrants whose children are not prepared to face an instructional setting that, in most cases, contrasts sharply with what they had experienced prior to immigrating. Although the new curriculum may have filled some of the gaps that were missing in the old curriculum, many Black francophone parents still find it problematic. For some, the curriculum does still not address the issues that affect the everyday lives of children. In other words, they believe that schools need a curriculum that all students can relate to and that will motivate them to be the best they can be. Toufasson observes, “In my opinion, the new curriculum misses the opportunity for really supporting the learning of minority children, because I think that the teaching approach is now tighter, more rigid, and leaves teachers with less time for classroom instruction.” The lack of more teaching time for teachers also angers many parents. Toufasson continues, “It is like a child running to his father and saying, ’You know something, Dad, I have just taught the French alphabet to my dog’. In addition, when his father replies, ‘Have you really taught it your pet? The child replies, ‘Yes, but I do not know if the pet understood.’ Toufasson elaborates on the moral behind this analogy:
L’éducation [publique] est devenue une industrie où c’est le volume et non la qualité qui préoccupe l’école, où il faut produire et produire plus. On enseigne aux enfants mais on ne se préoccupe pas s’ils ont compris ou pas. Ma fille par exemple n’apprend rien si je ne lui apprends pas quelque chose. Cela me décourage et ça décourage beaucoup d’autres parents que je connais, surtout ceux qui ont fait de bonnes études avant de venir dans ce pays et qui se retrouvent maintenant coincer entre trouver du travail pour subvenir aux besoins de leur famille et s’impliquer dans les activités [de l’école de leurs enfants]. Devant ces deux choix, tous les gens que je connais ont d’abord choisi de chercher du travail pour valoriser leurs études et leurs expériences acquises avant leur immigration et subvenir aux besoins de leur famille.

Public education has become an industry where it is volume, not quality, that counts. Schools must produce more and more. Teachers teach children without much concern of whether or not they understand the subject matter. Ma daughter, for instance does not learn anything if I do not teach her. This approach discourages many parents particularly those who received excellent education prior to immigrating. Often these parents are faced with a difficult decision: they must choose between working to support their families or becoming involved in their children’s school. Between these two choices, all those that I know have chosen to work and support their families first.
Janine also makes a connection between the new curriculum and the teaching approach; she argues that the resulting negative effects on Black parents in French-language schools explain the non-involvement of some parents. Moreover, she notes, “In spite of the passionate dreams that Black francophone parents have for their children and the fact that the curriculum is somewhat alienating because it is too European-centered, we must continuously fight for what is best for our children.” This, in my view, implies also that schools must make an effort to shape their teaching methodologies, both in terms of pedagogy and strategies to ensure that the knowledge base captures the wide body of community and off-school knowledge and expertise students bring to the school and classroom. There are parents who link the lack of parents’ participation in school with what they perceive as intellectual deficit of teachers. Janine explains:

Je crois que beaucoup d’enseignants ne sont pas intellectuellement préparés à enseigner aux enfants, et socialement bien formés pour communiquer et encourager la participation des parents dans les écoles.

I think that many teachers have intellectual deficits. I believe they are not prepared intellectually to teach the children, nor do they have the social skills to communicate effectively with parents and promote their involvement in the schools.

Interestingly, the data of this research also reveal that the school curriculum not only hinders parental involvement in school, but it also brings out what some parents describe as “internalized feelings,” arising from their own school experiences. Put differently, parents and/or their children who do not see themselves represented in the curriculum or through the school
pedagogy and other educational resources feel further alienated by the school system. Speaking about how internalizing feelings can affect parents, Janine reports:

In some cases, parents who internalize their negative treatment at the hands of school personnel in the dominant society tend to be indifferent when asked to participate in their children’s schools. My own past negative internal feelings bubble up readily when I am instructed by a member of the dominant group to perform certain types of activities, even in my workplace.

Janine later argued that anecdotal evidence show that most immigrants, compared to other segments of the population, are more sensitive to actions, remarks that they see as demeaning to them. This comment by Janine may apply to other Black francophone parents who are battling with their own negative internal feelings and attitudes.

Immigration policies.

Black francophone parents also cite immigration policies and practices as another barrier to their involvement in their children’s schools. Throughout the interviews, parents observed that potential immigrants receive little or no information about the Canadian educational system, from diplomatic representations abroad, prior to immigrating to Canada. Most parents contend that immigration offices, consulates, and high commissions should provide would-be immigrants the necessary information on the Canadian school system. Unfortunately, as Comrad observes, “It is only after the immigrants’ arrival in the host country that they are made aware of the myriad challenges they face, including education.” Instead of providing information about what the new immigrant should expect of the school system in the host country prior to immigrating, the immigration offices overseas are less concerned and refuse to be straight in terms of expectations the would–be immigrants may have concerning the school system. Referring to
Section 23 and echoing Lajoie’s comment on this section, Toufasson observes, “If I had known, for example, about Section 23 before immigrating, this would have helped me in my social and economic integration. As a result, I would have been able to help my child much quicker, make informed choices upon my arrival, and even assist other parents and their children in the community. Unfortunately, that is not the case. It is only after the parents’ arrival here that they have to manage things through friends (for those who have one) or by themselves. And then one blames parents when children start to have troubles with school.” Doucette, another parent, shares this view in a slightly different manner:

Je pense qu’ils [people] blâment vite les immigrants sans chercher à comprendre la cause des choses. Pour savoir si le puits est profond, il faut que tu baisses la tête pour regarder en bas. Si tu ne peux pas voir le fond alors tu peux affirmer que le puits est profond, sinon tu ne doit pas critiquer ou blâmer ou critiquer les parents pour leur non participation dans l’éducation de leurs enfants [en d’autres mots, ne jugez pas quelqu’un si vous n’avez pas été à sa place]

I think they put too much blame on immigrant parents without looking for the root of problems. If you want to find out the depth of a well, you must look inside it. If you cannot see the bottom, then you can say that the well is deep; otherwise, you should not criticize or blame parents for their lack of involvement in their children’s education [translation: you should not judge a person until you have walked a mile in her shoes.]
Other Barriers

On individual level, some Black Francophones of African origin who participated in this study identify teacher’s deficit ideology as playing a crucial role in preventing them from becoming involved in their children’s education. According to Bartolome and Trueba (2000), deficit ideologies continue to have harmful effects on teacher-parent relations. The deficit theory, popular in the 1960s, proposes that minority parents fail to be involved in schools because they are “deprived of cultural or social advantages” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995, p. 238) necessary for involvement in school. According to Doucette, “Many minority teachers privilege dominant group experiences and ways of doing things, as a result these teachers inevitably reinforce the school’s negative perceptions about minority parents.” This kind of behaviour on the part of the school encourages teachers in how they communicate with parents. In the same vein, Moriba also observes, “From a man’s point of view, I think many teachers believe that Black parents are not knowledgeable and educated enough to understand the school system, and this attitude is still held by many teachers in French-language schools today.” When I asked for suggestions to counter balance teachers’ negative attitudes, Moriba suggests, “You know if we could get minority parents and teachers in French-language schools together, speaking the same language, working together, being on the same page, that would help. If we can learn to talk to each other without any pre-conceived ideas, then our children will end up getting a better education and be less marginalized.” Kankou also echoes a similar viewpoint, but adds intimidation in schools as a barrier to that strategy, because as she stated later, “There are parents who feel intimidated by teachers while others feel alienated because of school practices.” Speaking about intimidation and alienation, which can have lasting negative psychological effects such as preventing them from dealing appropriately with their children’s education, Comrad observes:
Un parent qui a un faible niveau d’éducation ou qui n’est pas du tout éduqué pourrait ne pas être suffisamment confiant de lui même pour téléphoner à l’enseignant et lui poser des questions au sujet de l’éducation de ses enfants. Étant donné que ce parent n’est pas psychologiquement prêt à répondre aux questions de l’enseignant concernant ses enfants, il va sans dire qu’il ne va certainement pas se porter volontaire non plus pour les activités de l’école. Bref, en tant que parent, il y a moins de chance que je m’implique dans les activités scolaires si je crois que mon implication ne fera pas de différence.

A parent with limited formal schooling, or who is illiterate may lack self-confidence to call a teacher and inquire about his children’s learning. The same parent will certainly not be quick to volunteer for school activities, because psychologically he is not prepared to answer questions from the schoolteacher about his children. In sum, as a parent, if I am not confident that I can be of assistance to my children, I am less likely to become involved in their education.

**Perceived Inaction of Community Leaders**

In my opinion, community leadership is not about privilege over people; it is about responsibilities that leaders must take to ensure their members are well served and informed about the school system. In Black francophone communities, however, the data gathered from parents reveal that the role of leaders appears to be focused in the wrong direction. Minor and trivial issues often preoccupy some leaders who should be spending their time listening to
parents and engaging them for more action regarding their children’s education, instead of spending time in infighting over minor things. Unfortunately, it as if some leaders are strapped, unable to take action, or worse, preoccupied by trivialities and competing with one another on ideologies, which they often bring with them from their homeland. As Comrad observed, “community leaders must stop trivialities and let their actions speak louder than their words if they want our communities to achieve tangible things.”

In sum, the research participants recognize that their community leaders spend a good amount of their time on important issues, but those issues may not be the primary ones. In addition to offering his perspectives on psychological and other forms of barriers to parental involvement in school, Comrad further acknowledges and recognizes that community leadership is important as it can help parents navigate the school system and foster the support that they provide for their children. He restates his point by citing examples of potential actions that community leaders can take: Community leaders could develop strategies aimed at preparing and helping community members psychologically in order to face society’s challenges. Community leaders could also organize workshops about the school system, as well as workshops dealing with social and economic integration into the host society. They could work hard to eliminate polarization, one of the indicators about defeat within their respective communities. Leaders of other Black communities could also be invited to our communities to share their own experiences with us and provide advice on living in Canada. In addition, community leaders could establish a system of mentorship whereby new immigrants could receive guidance from those who are already well established. This would prevent parents and new immigrants from having to cope with the pitfalls experienced by their predecessors.
Doucette echoes Comrad’s viewpoint and offers a sort of alternative to community leaders inaction, “Parents are usually unable to participate in school-driven activities like parent council meetings, among other activities; however, I am of the opinion that our leaders could send a representative to some of these activities to voice parents’ concerns and report back to the community. In this way, community parents would be informed about major educational issues such as the planned Black-focused school.” Like Doucette and Comrad, others share the view that the inaction of the community leaders in promoting things like an after-school centre for their children is a real barrier for many. Kankou explains, “If we had an after-school centre, some parents would be willing to sacrifice some of their time to go there. This centre must be exclusively for our children, and staffed with volunteers from our communities. It must be a place where the children will feel good about themselves, their culture and the learning environment.” In light of financial and other resources constraints that school boards continue to experience, this suggestion may be too simplistic because both Doucette and Kankou admit that these suggestions are “easier said than done.” They recognize that the challenges that parents face apply to community leaders as well. In addition, they understand that without the political support and the backing of provincial and municipal governments, school boards and community members, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to have an after-school centre for Black children exclusively.

**Barriers Related to the Legacy of Colonial Education**

The wave of independence that gripped a significant number of French African colonies in the 1960s did not necessarily bring about the disappearance of colonialism. Put differently, the simple affirmation of a right does not mean the effective exercise of that right. This was evidenced in the new educational system that was supposed to replace the colonial system. The
new educational system was, in fact, a continuation of the colonial education system in spite of the former colonies being granted formal/nominal political independence. According to three of the parents in this study, the colonial educational system they experienced, and which sought to establish the superiority of the colonial knowledge over native knowledge, and portrayed indigenous knowledge as archaic and irrational (Smith, 2002), is a psychological barrier which prevent some parents from becoming involved in their children’s education in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada. Comrad observes, “Parents like me, who have experienced French colonial education, share the view that the nexus educators and students are sacred that is untouchable. We have learned that parents and students must worship educators as if they were worshipping their “divinity.” In other words, as Mapp (2003) argues, parents are not expected to become involved in school, and attempts to do so could be characterized as disrespectful. There are parents, particularly those who received their education prior to, or right after, their country acquired independence for whom the school is one of the institutional structures that serve the political and ideological interests of the government. As a result, mistrust and apprehension continue to govern those parents’ attitudes toward the school’s affairs, and especially when they reminisce about the way the school system had negated the knowledge they brought to school. Etienne states, “Our indigenous knowledge was not respected in those schools. We went to school to learn French. Think French. Act French. It was awful.” To borrow from Dei (2003), Indigenous knowledge is defined here as knowledge that is “accumulated” by a group of people, not necessarily indigenous, who by centuries of unbroken residence develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world. Social, cultural and other forms of knowledge that parents and students bring to school can only enrich the education system.
When I asked Etienne to elaborate on the link between parents’ involvement in the school and the colonial education system, he reports:

Je vois un lien entre le passé colonial et la participation à l’école. C’est surtout évident lorsque je regarde l’éducation coloniale et celle des enfants aujourd’hui. Moi, j’ai un passé colonial, mais mes enfants auront un passé Canadien. Dans le passé colonial, le maître n’était pas un ami alors qu’ici au Canada, le maître est un ami en ce sens qu’on peut tutoyer l’enseignant. Les parents sont plus ou moins des partenaires dans le système scolaire. Tel n’est pas le cas lorsque j’allais à l’école en Afrique. De par mon expérience scolaire dans mon pays d’origine, le mot « gouvernement » signifiait autorité, peur, et soumission. C’était la loi du « lion » qui régnait. A cause de la barrière coloniale, il n’y a pas de communication entre l’enseignant et le parent d’élève. L’enfant apprenait vite I see a relationship between parental involvement in school and my colonial past. This is particularly obvious when I look back on colonial education and the way children are educated today. I have a colonial past, but my children will have a Canadian past. Unlike the colonial era in which the teacher was not viewed as a friend, here in Canada, the teacher, in a sense, is a friend whom you can call by his/ her first name. Parents are more or less partners in education. That was not the case when I was going to school in Africa. From my school experiences back home, the term” government” in those days meant authority, nervousness, and submissiveness. The “law of the lion” was supreme. Because of colonial barriers, there was no communication between teachers and parents. The child learned quickly that his success was contingent on the school. Parents
Like Comrad and Etienne, Doucette also draws a connection between colonial education and parental involvement, but from a different angle. She notes, “I am sure the colonial system is a big deal for some parents. However, I am sure those who experienced both the Canadian and the colonial systems may, or may not, take into account their colonial experiences when dealing with the school. Many parents simply try to deal with the reality.” I agree. Black parents in general want to be realistic in their approach with the school. After all, every parent helps and supports her / his children according to their means.

Community Leaders

This section highlights barriers to Black francophone parents’ involvement in school, from the viewpoint of community leaders. The study data reveal that while the three community leaders interviewed for this study are from different ethnic and geographical backgrounds, their perceptions of the barriers associated with parental involvement in francophone schools are almost similar. Barriers identified in this section are based on the leaders’ personal experiences in the school system and in their respective communities. For instance, Centranze has pointed out at the beginning of our interview that he can only talk about his own experiences and
observations; on the other hand, Yombo and Sekou, the two other community leaders, indicated that they will share with me some of the stories they have heard in their communities regarding barriers to their involvement in school. In Table 7, I have classified in the major barriers identified by community leaders under two main headings: individual barriers and barriers related to school.

Table 7

**Key Barriers Identified by Community Leaders**

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<tr>
<th>Sphere of influence</th>
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<td>Individual barriers</td>
<td>• Lack of awareness</td>
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<td>• Blind spots</td>
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<td>• Lack of social capital</td>
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<td>• Lack of resources</td>
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<td>School barriers</td>
<td>• Cultural values</td>
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**Individual Barriers**

The research data suggest that several real and potential individual barriers can explain Black francophone parents’ failure to become involved in their children’s education. The parents and teachers who participated in this study have already highlighted some of the same factors as contributing factors for parental involvement in school. For the purpose of my research, I have highlighted only individual barriers that I deem worth mentioning and which, from the community leaders’ perspectives, need to be addressed, collectively or individually, in order to involve Black francophone parents in their children’s education. These barriers include lack of
parents’ awareness of the usefulness of involvement in school, parents’ blind attitude towards involvement, psychological obstacles, the lack of spiritual connectedness and social capital for Black francophone parents, and the lack of resources to carry out good intentions for involvement.

Lack of awareness.

Community leaders point out that the lack of parents’ involvement in school is primarily grounded in parents’ misunderstanding or lack of awareness of the role they can play in their children’s education. Based on their own experiences, all three community leaders report that, in their opinion, the majority of the parents in their communities are unaware of their abilities to influence their children’s education in a more positive way, particularly the role they can play in their children’s school. Minority parents’ unawareness of their role in education is confirmed in Gabikini’s (2005) study. That study finds that 70% of racial minority Francophones in the Ottawa region indicate that they do not know how to become involved in their children’s schools, even though 95% of those parents believe that involvement in their children’s education can help their children succeed in school. Centranze calls the lack of awareness of parents as “one of the most significant barriers facing new minority immigrant parents in general.” In his opinion, however, the involvement of Black francophone parents due to the lack of awareness should be placed in the context of their lack of understanding of the [French-language] education system. When asked to pinpoint the ground that may be held to justify the lack of parents’ awareness, Centranze gives the following response: “…I believe the cause of the unawareness falls on both the parents and the host society. At the individual level, the school system that the parent has known prior to immigrating is different from the one in the host country. Thus, when parents come to recognize the need to do something regarding their children’s education, they
have always in mind their own schooling experiences, which may, or may not, be a colonial type of education. Reflecting about their own schooling, the parents fail to recognize that their own schooling experiences are vastly different from those of their children’s school experiences in Canada.” This statement illustrates that parents’ schooling experiences play a critical role in the way they perceive and participate in their own children’s schooling. It also means that there may be a generational consideration at play when it comes to the involvement of some Black francophone parents in their children’s education. Although none of the parents interviewed raised this issue, it is not an understatement to say that parents of older generations may be less flexible to school involvement compared to parents of the younger generation. The generational issue in parents’ involvement in school was also alluded to in the research data analysis of the teachers. It is indicative of the wide variety of factors that hinder the involvement of Black francophone parents in school. The second other important factor identified by Centranze relates to the role of immigration policies in parents’ decision whether or not to become involved in school. He claims that, “Immigration people are not doing their job correctly.” Since Ontario is an immigrant province, this suggests that parents expect immigration officials to provide them with information about the education system before they arrive in Canada. By drawing a connection between parental involvement in school and immigration policies, the community leaders corroborate the parents’ accounts regarding the importance of taking into account the role of immigration officials when examining barriers that hinder their involvement in school.

In the same vein and commenting on the lack of awareness, Yombo draws a parallel between the lack of awareness of racial francophone parents and the role of immigration officials and states:

...La réalité est qu’avant …The truth is that parents are
d’immigrer les parents n’ont pas d’information sur l’éducation au Canada. Peut importe si les parents arrivent ici avec un statut officiel ou pas, dès l’instant qu’ils ont des enfants et qu’ils débarquent, leurs enfants sont obligés d’aller tout de suite à l’école selon les exigences en vigueur. Une fois à l’école, ces enfants nouvellement arrivés commencent à être bombardés de messages de l’école et de la société. Du point de vue de l’école, cette façon est normale puisque le parent est supposé préparer son enfant pour être éduquer, et l’enfant aussi doit, dès son premier jour à l’école, être préparé à l’idée de commencer à assumer certaines responsabilités personnelle de citoyen. Ces messages sont parfois contradictoires de ceux des parents. Ils laissent certains parents dans la confusion quant à leur rôle précis dans l’éducation de leurs enfants.

uninformed about the Canadian educational system prior to immigrating. Whether or not parents arrive in Canada with or without an official immigration status, the minute they arrive, their children are required to attend school according to the law. Once in school, these kids are bombarded with various messages from the school and society. Those messages are appropriate from the school’s standpoint, because it is assumed that the parent must prepare his / her child ready to learn and become a responsible citizen. The child must also be prepared to assume new personal responsibilities as a citizen. These messages are often in contradiction with those from the parents. They leave some parents confused as to their precise role in their children’s education.
In reviewing the community leader’s comments (including off-record conversations) about immigration policies, it becomes clear to me that there are parents who also bear some responsibility regarding their own lack of understanding of the education system. As Sekou put it, “Some parents think that their children should not go to drama class, dance, field trips, etc. They think that children should simply focus on core academic subjects. These parents do not know that these activities are actually part of the learning process.” Sekou believes that these parents deprive their children from having an essential learning experience without even realizing it. As Sekou underscores later, “The lack of [parents’] education can certainly be related to the lack of understanding of the school system, which in turn can explain why some parents do not take involvement seriously. It’s those parents who often complain that they cannot help their children because they cannot write.”

**Blind spot attitude.**

In Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, *Blind spot* (n) is defined as “1a. The point in the retina not sensitive to light where the optic nerve passes through the inner coat of the eyeball; 1b. A portion of a field not seeable; 2. An area in which one fails to exercise understanding, judgment or discrimination.” Centranze utilizes the *blind spot* analogy to explain why he thinks racial francophone parents fail to become involved in their children’s education. In his view, some racial minority parents behave as if there is nothing uncommon in their approach to their children’s education.

He explains, “The *blind spot* analogy is like explaining to a person sitting in a moving subway that she is going in the direction opposite to her real destination. If this person is absolutely convinced that the train is moving toward the right direction, even though this is not the case in reality; this will make it challenging to convince that person to switch trains and take
the one going in the right direction, towards the person’s intended destination. Keeping this analogy in mind, it will be even more challenging to persuade that person that she is missing important roles pertaining to her children’s future, when she thinks that she is not missing out anything. It is only after some time has passed that parents come to the realization that something has been left out of their children’s educational equation.” According to Centranze, “The blind spot analogy highlights one basic reality: many racialized francophone parents believe that their inactions regarding their children’s education are within the norm, that is, implicitly stated, no cause for concern.” This analogy implies that Black francophone parents of African origin may have good intentions when it comes to their children’s education, but until those parents turn their heads and look in their blind spot, they will continue to fail to exercise understanding and good judgment regarding their involvement in their children’s school. In this characterization, parents see uninvolvevement in their children’s schooling as acceptable and believe that they have done their part. However, thinking that parents’ responsibilities are limited to enrolling their children in school is a mistake, because as we all know individual provinces run the Canadian educational system, and as Centranze contends, “Parents must understand that it is to their benefit to always look in the blind spot before it is too late.”

**Psychological attitudes.**

According to Eccles and Harold (1996), parents' confidence in their own intellectual abilities is the most salient predictor of school involvement. This may relate to parents' own educational background; that is, parents may not perceive themselves as capable of helping their children in school. Lack of confidence on the part of parents may in turn, result in students’ lack of confidence in their parents' ability to help them with schooling (Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). While two of the community leaders fail to raise psychological factors as a barrier to
involvement in school, Sekou acknowledges that this is, indeed, a problem for some parents. He states, “Many parents in my community, particularly the unlettered ones, are scared with the simple thought of contacting their children’s school or of receiving memos from the school that they cannot read. Because of that, they have some psychological apprehension whenever they deal with the school.” He went on to observes also that, “Other parents have negative perceptions of the school, which are derived from their own negative school experiences or the fear of making the school aware of their limited educational level or inexperience with the educational system.” Ramifications of the negative impact of psychological barriers and racism in school have been found to affect all parents including those whose children attend early learning centres. For example, a study conducted by Rowley et al. (2004), argues that mothers of kindergarteners who believe that their teachers discriminate against them based on race are less likely to be involved in the schools, and their involvement experiences are less positive, if they do become involved.

Psychological issues are particularly more disturbing for racialized francophone parents who come from war-ravaged countries, and who may have suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. Often, other issues related to adjustment in Canada compound these psychological problems, and for which the community feels impotent to solve. Sekou explains in his native language, translated in French:

Ceux qui ont été forcés de quitter leur pays et qui sont des réfugiés ici sont très vulnérables émotionnellement. J’ai connu une bonne femme qui venait toujours pleurer dans notre Mosquée

Those who are refugees or who have been forced to leave their country are very vulnerable, emotionally. I have seen one woman who used to come to our Mosque
This quote indicates that some community leaders are indeed aware of their members’ concerns. In addition, the quote gives compelling reasons for these community leaders not to stay on the sideline when it comes to issues of concern to their members. However, as indicated later in this study, some parents are simply unable to participate fully in their children’s education due to circumstances that are beyond their control. As Sekou noted, “This is particularly true for other communities and the immigrants who come from world-ravaged countries.” These immigrants and others, I would argue, are usually bound by the same inter-generational issues and challenges.
Lack of spiritual connectedness.

Although little reference is usually made to “spirituality” in elementary schools, and silencing the spiritual voice through privileging the educational / school voice is the norm in the two French-language schools involved in this research, I was surprised to find that for one of the community leaders, schooling a child would be incomplete if it has no spiritual dimension. In particular, for him, a school’s mandate must take into account the spiritual well being of its students and their parents if it is to be a culturally relevant and transformative education. Sekou sees his role in the community as someone who can provide vision and guidance, and identify needs and concerns of all of his community members. He also believes that leaders, especially spiritual leaders, are people of influence in the community who can counsel parents in many ways. In that respect, he encourages his community members to be connected to something in life, whatever that might be. At the same time, since he considers himself as a spiritually grounded individual, this attitude tends to be reflected in his relationships with community members, as well as the way he perceives barriers to parents’ involvement in school. He contends, “People who are spiritually connected are able to help their children become a good person, and a better educated person too.” According to Sekou, this is because the lack of spirituality is equivalent to self-erecting barriers for involvement in children’s education. Sekou is quick to acknowledge, however, that not everyone understands the meaning of spirituality, which he, himself, equates with religious beliefs. He also acknowledges that spiritual connectedness must not be confined to a person’s interpretation of her / his traditional values because, as he observes, “such a person is always consumed by worshiping something else, not education.” In that sense, he argues, “the lack of spirituality is a barrier to parents’ involvement in their children’s education.” This implies that efforts to have Black francophone parents become involved in school must address the spiritual dimension for educators to take into
account. In other words, schooling children of Black francophone parents should take into account the collective insights of the African proverb and spiritual traditions that offer some collective wisdom for the building and sustaining of community and the work of social transformation.

Days after my initial interview with Sekou, I phoned him back and asked for an informal sharing of viewpoints on the issue of spirituality and parental involvement in school. As if he had anticipated my questions, Sekou told me at the outset these thought-provoking statements, which confirmed the aforementioned African proverb:

- Education can positively transform the human being if we help learners engage on the personal and spiritual levels
- Parents can change if we expose them to what matters to them
- Learning must not be a one-way view (reference to the rationalistic and individualistic assumptions of Descartes: “I THINK, THEREFORE I AM”)

**Lack of social capital.**

Social capital refers to "the norms and values people hold that result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships” (Edwards, 2004, p. 81). Using this definition, family, friends, and acquaintances constitute an important asset essential to well-being in any society. The research data reveal that the lack of social capital is inextricably linked to the non-participation of some parents in school. Although the voices of the three community leaders fail to give a specific situation or example of this factor with parental involvement, these leaders were firm in their belief. For example, Centranze asserted the need to be socially connected, “When parents are seeking support to deal with children’s educational issues, other social adjustments like searching for employment, or simply living a full and active life, it pays to
know people [to help navigate the system].” For Sekou who worked briefly in an employment agency in Europe before immigrating to Canada, “having social connections is beneficial when one is looking for employment,” and social connections can promote successful educational attainment (White, Field, Spence, & Maxim, 2005). Unfortunately, for Black francophone parents the reality is that many of them are living in silos with no social ties with other people outside their own communities. As a result, parents are not only uninformed about the school system, but also about other social institutions. Sekou highlights some of the elements that explain how the lack of social capital is a barrier for Black francophone parents:

D’abord, il y a la barrière linguistique. Ici la langue majoritairement parlée est l’Anglais. Le plus souvent, il y a plusieurs endroits où l’immigrant ne peut faire usage de son Français. Il y aussi le facteur « pratique sociales » ou on ne se rend pas visite sans prendre rendez-vous. Tout ça fait que beaucoup on du mal à socialiser en dehors des membres de leur propre communauté. Même si les enfants ont tendance à mieux s’adapter et socialiser, en dehors de l’école, leurs champs de socialisation sont aussi réduits puisque les parents n’ont pas de moyens de locomotion.

First, there is a linguistic barrier. English is the language spoken in Ontario. Hence, there are many places where a racialized francophone parent cannot make use of the French language. There is also the factor of social practices, which requires that one make an appointment before visiting someone else. All of these constitute an impediment to socializing with people outside your own community. Even though children socialize and integrate quite easily outside the school, their socialization network is limited too, because parents do not have transportation means to take their children to their
pour amener leurs enfants chez leurs amis. Parallèlement, je reconnais qu’il y aussi le problème d’acceptation qui se pose dans certains cas. En tant qu’immigrant. On doit d’abord se sentir accepter en premier lieu. Dans mon cas personnel, lorsque j’ai commencé à aller à l’école de mes enfants, je ne me sentais pas accepté [à l’école]. Je sentais que ma présence n’était pas appréciée. Je le voyais, je le sentais ; ce genre de réception n’encourage pas les parents surtout si ce sont de nouveaux immigrants qui n’ont déjà pas de relations personnelles.

friends all the time or to go meet with other parents. There is also the problem of acceptance in the society. As an immigrant, one needs to feel accepted first. In my case, I did not feel comfortable when my kids started going to school. I did not feel accepted [in school], and I felt uncomfortable. This lack of welcome does not encourage immigrant parents, especially new immigrants, who are already lacking human connections.

**Lack of resources.**

The data also reveal that the lack of resources (usually financial) that both parents and community leaders need in order to help as many parents as possible become involved in their children’s education is compelling. Stated differently, the need for financial resources was quite apparent throughout my interviews with the three community leaders, despite their own admission that they have some responsibilities in educating and helping their parents in many areas, including how to navigate the educational system, the socio-economic system, and even
the political system in Canada. As Yombo puts it, “In a perfect world, we [community leaders] should be helping our community members better by providing them with relevant information on school participation, integration, among other things. If we are unable to find information about a particular issue, we must seek help where appropriate, even if that means approaching other communities…. Unfortunately, however, we [community leaders] do not have the resources and we are not even sure how far and what rights we have to interfere in families’ affairs.” Sekou echoes a similar view, “We need to reach out to all the community leaders, that is, the Imam, the President, or the spokesperson of each community, to support each other. I confess, though, that some parents do listen to me when I advise them, but I cannot go beyond advising. I cannot tell the parents that they must or must not do certain things. I can only give my personal perspectives on their problems.” When I asked Sekou and Yombo to tell me what concrete actions they would take if they had financial resources, both remain evasive. While Sekou simply stated, “We will help them” Yombo offered no solution. As the researcher, I interpret these vague answers as something that is beyond their control, or something they have never thought of, given the improbability of that occurrence. Another problem that Sekou acknowledges is that “some parents are very ‘stubborn’ and do not want to listen to advice, aimed at making them understand the importance of becoming involved in their children’s education.” Centranze talks about the importance of a community leader in these terms:

C’est important que je sois perçu comme une ressource par les familles dans la communauté, c’est à dire comme quelqu’un vers qui se tourner pour des conseils lorsqu’ils ont des problèmes ou

It is important that families in the community see me as a resource that is, someone who they can turn to for advice on how to accomplish certain things. If they see me in that light, then that would help them
lorsqu’ils veulent savoir comment faire certaines choses. Lorsqu’ils me voient sous cet angle, alors cela leur aide dans leurs besoins éducationnels et d’autres problèmes de la société auxquels ils sont confrontés tous les jours. Cela leur aidera aussi dans leurs interactions avec leurs enfants, car le plus souvent la façon de pensée des parents est simplement dépassée.

Although these three community leaders take some responsibilities in terms of facilitating parental involvement in schools, they recognize that parents themselves must first take the initiative to become involved in their children’s education because there is no bread without yeast. In other words, the fundamentals must be there for parental involvement in school. Furthermore, the community leaders are in consensus that teachers also must play a significant role in order for Black francophone parents to participate fully in their children’s education. Sekou argues that, “Like in a non traditional school [i.e., Islamic school], an educator who communicates effectively with parents of their own or of different cultures, promotes parental involvement and increases the likelihood of academic success for each child.”

**School Barriers**

Although several of the barriers identified by community leaders as individual barriers overlap, to some extent, with those previously identified as school barriers, I have chosen to
retain here only two: the effects of school perceptions on parents’ cultural values, and the lack of representation of Black Francophones in French-language schools. The reasons for limiting my choice to those two factors are twofold: first, it is people’s understanding, acceptance and appreciation of cultural values of others that help dismantle parental perceptions of being treated differently in the school system. Secondly, unless ethnic minority and Black francophone parents see themselves represented in Ontario’s French-language schools, some parents will continue to deliberately not respond to the school’s involvement initiatives. These two critical barriers are developed in greater depth.

*Cultural divergence.*

There are educators who recognize the contributions of children’s culture to their learning. Nonetheless, the study data reveal that many educators and school personnel tend to overlook the cultural contributions of Black francophone parents and their children. As I indicated earlier, these schools have a significant number of children from Black francophone parents. Speaking about his daughter’s school, Sekou reports some observations about the school’s practice regarding religious holidays:

Dans l’école de ma fille, grand nombre d’enfants sont d’origine ethnique, et la majorité de ces enfants sont d’origine Africaine. Dans cette école publique comme dans d’autres, on n’est pas supposé amener la religion. Pourtant, l’école prend toujours le soin d’informer les parents par l’intermédiaire de leurs enfants

In my daughter’s school, a significant number of kids are of immigrant backgrounds, the majority of these children being of African origin. In that public school and others, there should be no reference to religion. However, school personnel always informed the parents through their children
de la célébration des fêtes comme la Noel, la Ste. Patrick, et l’Action de Grace. Pour se justifier, on nous fait toujours croire que ces événements sont à la fois de nature religieuse, culturelle et traditionnelle pour les Québécois. Si tel est le cas, alors pourquoi ne pas aussi fêter d’autres religions au lieu de subir des traitements préférentiels ?

about the celebration of Christmas, St. Patrick’s Day, Thanksgiving etc.” The school rationalizes its action by arguing that these are religious, cultural and traditional celebrations for Quebecers; that it is part of their cultural values and traditions. Why not then celebrate other cultures and religions in the schools too instead of being subjected to differential treatments?

When I asked him to substantiate these comments with another example, Sekou went to elaborate what he means by differential treatment when it comes to observance of religious holidays in school:

Lorsqu’elles [les écoles] sortent nos enfants pour les excursions scolaires, on leur fait manger toutes sortes de choses y compris du cochon qui est pourtant interdit selon leur religion. Ceci montre un manque de respect envers la culture de nos enfants. Lorsqu’on sort ma fille, je m’attends à ce que sa culture soit respectée au même titre que l’école s’attend à ce que mes

When they [schools] take our children for school trips, they make our children eat all kinds of things, including pork, which is not allowed in our religion. This demonstrates a complete lack of respect towards the cultural values of our children. I would expect my daughter’s culture to be respected when she goes on school trips the same way the
enfants participent à des activités qui ne reflètent pas leur croyance culturelle. Ce n’est pas une question d’être musulman, c’est simplement une question de respect fondamental. On prétend qu’il n’y a pas de religion dans le système publique. Ce n’est pas vrai parce qu’il y a Noël, l’arbre de Noël. Par ailleurs il est malheureux que même pendant le Ramadan, on fait même des tests le jour de l’Eid [fête célébrant la fin du Ramadan, mois du jeûne] sachant bien qu’il y a des enfants musulmans ne vont pas venir à l’école ce jour là. Ces enfants peuvent être accommodés si on veut qu’ils se sentent intégrer dans l’école.

school expects our children to participate in school activities that do not necessarily reflect their cultural beliefs. It is not a matter of being a Muslim; it is simply a matter of basic respect. One pretends that there is no religion in the public school system. This is untrue because there is Christmas and Christmas trees. In addition, unfortunately, schools even conduct classroom tests in the middle of the fasting month or the day of Eid [celebration of the end of the Ramadan month], knowing that some children’s religious commitments would prevent them from participating in those tests. At minimum, if schools want to integrate our children, they should accommodate them.

As this comment shows, the lack of knowledge that many educators have of other cultures may explain some school practices. While it is the responsibility of educators to know their student population, it is also incumbent upon parents to reach out to educators, especially if the parents feel that their children are not getting the help they need. Even if parents do not
understand the language or cannot afford to be involved in their children’s education, in Sekou’s view, the school remains accountable for the success of the children. Later, Sekou added that, “Teachers need to be educated about the multicultural nature of schools, because their comments about children often hurt and embarrass many parents, as well as the children themselves.”

Stated another way, many teachers do not know anything about the cultural values of children they teach. Sekou narrates this incident: “When my oldest daughter wore a beautiful Islamic dress at her graduation ceremonies, her teacher sent her home twice, asking her to change her clothes. With the exception of it having long sleeves, the dress was similar to that of many other children. This incident infuriated me to such an extent that I went to see the school principal the day it happened; he agreed that my daughter could wear her dress to the graduation ceremony. This kind of ignorance and poor judgment on the part of the teacher shows, to say the least, a total lack of understanding of the students they serve.”

Another barrier that prevents some parents from school involvement is the lack of representation of minority parents they see in the school. For Sekou, in francophone schools the voices of immigrant parents are missing on leadership teams and committees that make decisions on policies about budgets, curriculum, safety, parent outreach, and staffing, etc. This often means that the needs of immigrant children and families are not considered when decisions are being made.

**Teachers.**

Fine (1991) noted almost 19 years ago that educators care and that most of them have good intentions. Unfortunately, sometimes intentions are not good enough especially when it concerns the involvement of racial minority parents in their children’s education and in this case of Black francophone parents in Ontario’s French-language schools. This section highlights key
perceptions of four teachers (two Black and two White) who participated in this study. The four teachers have somewhat differing perspectives in terms of what hinders Black francophone parents’ desire or interest to be involved in their children’s education. These perspectives are to some extent drawn along racial difference in that some of the teachers blame the school while one in particular associates barriers with the racialized parents themselves. I have categorized barriers identified by teachers into two groups: individual barriers and school barriers. The following table summarizes key barriers identified by teachers.

Table 8

Key Barriers Identified by Teachers

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Individual Barriers

Unlike the community leaders, teachers’ opinions relating to individual barriers to the involvement of Black francophone parents, and the way in which parents can be supported are limited to two major categories of barriers: lack of parental control and lack of cooperation between educators. While the legal protection of children in schools and in society is used to explain the first factor, the second seems to be grounded in the selfish nature of the teaching profession. Data collected from the teachers suggest that these roadblocks are prevalent in the
perceptions of the two schools involved in this research. A detailed description of the teacher’s viewpoints on each of the factors identified is provided.

**Lack of parental control.**

The analysis of data provided by teachers who participated in this research suggests that minority parents value involvement in their children’s education just as much as educators do. Teachers also see the participation of Black francophone parents in school, in general, as a complex multi-faceted issue, which needs to be placed in the proper context by all those who have a stake in the education of children. Contextualizing is necessary here because in the teachers’ perspectives there are several problems related to the involvement of these parents in the school, one of which is the lack of parental control at home. Diougrand explains:

> En me basant sur mes années passées dans l’enseignement, je peux vous dire que certains parents ne se donnent plus la peine avec l’éducation de leurs enfants parce qu’ils n’ont pas de contrôle sur eux. Je ne sais pas s’il y a un problème de génération, mais il faut suivre mon raisonnement pour comprendre ce à quoi je veux en venir. Nos enfants de maintenant n’ont pas le même contrôle que ce que nous nous avions eu lorsque

> Over my many years of teaching, I can tell you that most parents do not bother with their children’s education because they have no control over their ‘flesh and blood’ at home. I don’t know if there is a generational issue here but to understand where I am going with this, follow my reasoning. Our children today do not have the same parental control our parents had over us when we were growing up. Schoolchildren are well protected by the
nous grandissions. Les élèves sont bien protégés par le système scolaire et le gouvernement. Les parents ne peuvent même pas donner une fessée à leurs propres enfants ou leur parler d’une manière désobligeante. Lorsque les enfants se rendent compte de ça, tout doit être désormais négocié avec eux. Si par exemple un enfant rapporte à l’école que son parent lui a donné une fessée ou lui a tapé sur son poignet, l’enseignant est obligé de rapporter cet incident aux autorités appropriés comme la Société d’Aide à l’Enfance. Conséquemment, cela crée beaucoup de problèmes à plusieurs parents qui, en fin de compte ne s’en font plus pour l’éducation de leurs enfants.

Diougrand’s comments could be interpreted to mean that even well intentioned parents are more likely not to become involved in their children’s education if their children listen more
to the outside world than they do with their own family. That means that involvement in school depends also on how parents manage their home. Not all the teachers share Diougrand’s comments, though. Patricia, a White teacher, counters Diougrand’s comments by stating that, “Some parents purposely take on their children because of school and government policies, and always argue that children must not stray from their families’ values and beliefs. These families do not quite understand that some conduct with children cannot be tolerated in Canada.” She further adds, “This is not to say that I do endorse children’s behavioral problems, because it is a matter of time before parents and their children understand each other better.” Bellhumeur, a Black female teacher, also notes that, “Black francophone parents must develop a genuine competitive interest in their children’s education.” At the same time, she acknowledges that it is difficult for a parent to know this if one is not educated in this system. That is why she contends that, “The lack of parental guidance for kids has more than one explanatory root.” For Bellhumeur, “it derives from parents’ lack of interest in the school system, which in turn stems either from their unwillingness and lack of interest to know the system, or their unawareness of their role in the system.” She further explains:

Les parents d’origine africaine que je connais aiment leurs enfants and veulent faire de leur mieux pour eux. Je crois que le problème est que beaucoup d’entre eux sont frustrés pour diverses raisons comme le manque d’emploi décent, les responsabilités envers d’autres membres de leur famille dans le pays d’origine, etc. D’autres parents simply do not know
parents ne connaissent tout simplement pas le rôle qu’ils doivent jouer dans l’éducation de leurs enfants. À mon avis, c’est l’effet combiné de tout cela qui fait que certains se désintéressent purement et simplement. Ces parents ont jeté l’éponge, et leur attitude défaitiste a ouvert la porte aux enfants de faire ce qu’ils veulent sans supervision.

When I asked the question, what do you do to help parents in their defeatist attitude with their children? She replied:

It is not easy for me as a minority teacher, because, first of all, I do not have any support from my peers and the principal’s office. Sometimes, though, I try to talk to parents and let them know that it is their responsibility to watch over their children, to ensure they do not lose their way. Another approach that I take is to constantly inform parents about schooling issues and remind them that it is really up to them, if they want their children to succeed. Two years ago, I convinced a Somalian mother to give consent for her son to receive help for his learning difficulties. Her child who was deemed to have learning disability qualified to receive extra coaching; however, the mother was uninformed about the process and the request for her consent to allow the school to provide support for her son. Occasionally, I also pay school trip’s fees or provide snacks for some children, because some parents cannot afford this. On average, I do that once or twice a year.
In response to the same question, Patricia notes, “I do my best whenever a parent comes to me. If I am unable to answer a phone call, I make sure I return the call later, maybe not the same day, but the same week.” Another White teacher, Ondiquoi, gives an account that is slightly different from that of Patricia and Bellhumeur’s. He blames the school for the non-involvement of Black parents and purports, “After representing the school on the school council, I can honestly say that it is not a level playing field for all parents. I witness this in the council’s meetings. I feel that some parents are not involved because they feel excluded. As for my own interaction with parents, I do what I can for any parent who comes to me for help or have questions about their children. I understand that we all have to do something about this situation; otherwise, it is going to be difficult for these children in every school. Also, sometimes I feel powerless, because they [Black francophone parents] tend to see teachers as part of their problems.” While the way school councils run is a cause for concern for this teacher, it is worth mentioning that there are parents who also need to do their share to facilitate cooperation with teachers, especially those who are on their “side.” Diougrand states, “As a teacher, I try to do the best for parents of my community. It hurts, but I have to confess that it is not easy because there are different types of parents. Some parents are confrontational on day one of the school; others believe that the school is not good for their children, because teachers do not do much for them.” There are also instances where a Black teacher feels more comfortable with White parents who feel comfortable with Black teachers. In those instances, it is easy for the Black teacher to help those parents because as Diougrand stated later, “unlike Black parents who approach the teacher only when they feel a certain level of comfort, White parents do not shy away to ask for help when necessary.” To illustrate this point, Diougrand alludes to this example:

One day a Black parent came to
This comment is an indication that the level of comfort between teachers and parents is important, and that parents seem to recognize that Black teachers could be effective role models for their children, whether they are from the same or a different ethnocultural background. Teachers also seem to recognize that the experience of difference (from the dominant culture) that parents share as people of colour could result in their child being able to identify with the teacher. Furthermore, the two Black teachers believe that as teachers of colour they can be more sensitive than dominant-group teachers can to the needs and experiences of racial minority parents and their children.

From the teachers’ perspective, the problem of involvement or non-involvement of Black francophone parents in school requires a look at the other side of the coin with openness that is
more critical. There are Black teachers who are, by experience, uncomfortable in their school setting. Diougrand illustrates this point with another example:

Lorsque j’ai commencé à enseigner à l’école xxxx, j’ai tout de suite été étiqueté parce que j’ai eu une prise de bec ou d’incompréhension avec la direction de l’école, tout simplement parce que j’ai suggéré d’inclure un item « les pratiques de l’école avec certains groupes de parents » dans l’agenda de la réunion qui regroupait le personnel enseignant. À cause de ce que j’avais déjà vécu dans mon ancienne école, cet item était une question importante pour moi. Malheureusement la direction d’école n’a pas aimé ma position et depuis ce jour là j’ai l’impression qu’on surveille tout ce que je fais, tous mes petits gestes. C’est un malaise d’avoir le sentiment d’être surveiller dans tout ce que tu fais à l’école.

When I began teaching in xxxx school, I had a misunderstanding with the school principal at staff meeting. In essence, at the meeting, I made the suggestion to include as an agenda item “the school practices in dealing with certain types of parents.” This was an important issue for me because of the things that I had experienced in my previous school. Unfortunately, the school principal did not appreciate my suggestion and since then I feel like every little thing I do is being scrutinized, that I am being watched. It is a bad sentiment to feel watched all the time in whatever I do in school.
Lack of cooperation.

Parents usually want to replicate themselves; that is, inculcate in their offspring the positive things they have learned in life. Unfortunately, from the teachers’ perspective the research data suggest that minority parents in general have the ill-conceived perception that it is the school, not parents, who must reach out; that the teacher must feel comfortable enough to come to them if there is a problem; that the teacher must not feel like, ‘Oh no, this child has a problem. Oh, my goodness, now I have to deal with that parent’. As a teacher, Bellhumeur points out, “I do not have that problem [of not wanting to deal with the parents]; I want to build a positive rapport with parents, work with them. I do not want to put the parents in the position of avoiding me, because that is just going to affect their children negatively.” This comment is perhaps a poignant reminder of the human face of schooling; there is no substitute for teachers and parents’ getting to know each other, working together for the best of children. For Diougrand, there is a sort of “laissez-faire” attitude that Black francophone parents display when dealing with the school. According to him, Black parents’ absence in the educational system undermines a partnership between the parents and the schools, leading to a lack of cooperation between these two stakeholders. He explains:

Pour les noirs francophones [parents d’origine sub-saharienne], c’est du laisser-faire pure et simple. La coopération peut être très difficile. Je m’explique. J’ai eu à faire à trois générations d’enfants d’une même famille mais je n’ai jamais vu un jour For Black francophone parents of sub-Saharan origin], it is a “laissez-faire. Cooperation with parents can be very difficult. I explain. Over the years, I have dealt with three generations of children from the same family, but have never seen or met with their parents. These parents do
leurs parents. Ces parents ne répondent pas aux appels de l’école. Pendant ce temps, je vois, en tant qu’africain, que des parents d’autres origines raciales s’impliquent beaucoup plus ; ils sont très motivés. Contrairement aux autres parents, les parents d’origine africaine peuvent par exemple commencer à signer les devoirs de leurs enfants une ou deux fois et par la suite ils ne le font plus pour des raisons que j’ignore toujours.

not answer [phone] calls from the school. At the same time, as an African, I see parents of other racial backgrounds involved in the school; they are very motivated. Unlike other parents, Black francophone parents may, for instance, sign off only twice or three times their children’s homework. Then they stop signing off the homework for reasons that are still unknown to me.

For Ondiquoi, parents and teachers roles seem to be intertwined, creating a seamless connection. He notes, “These parents need to know that their children’s education is important and that they must be accountable and play a role in the educational process; then they can hold us accountable. If children see that their parents are involved [in their education], then they are more interested and feel a sense of emotional support. If they [the children] know that it is a unified body dealing with them, it adds to their comfort level.” Ondiquoi further adds that, “Teachers already do as much as they can, but it can be a bit awkward; parents should not send their children to school, and fail to do what it takes to support them.” Although this comment may not reflect the viewpoint of the majority of White teachers, it is, nevertheless, indicative of the actual underlying mindset in public schooling. Parents and teachers expect from each other when it comes to children’s education.
In addition to the lack of cooperation and parental control, the four teachers also allude to a number of other parents-driven issues, which, in their opinion, can be considered as barriers to the participation of minority parents in the schools. For instance, Patricia states:

Employment for Black francophone parents is critical because it affects many things in their children’s life. Sometimes, I see children who do not have breakfast before coming to school or who do not bring lunch with them. I also see other children who bring lunch up to the 10th of the month, and thereafter you see them eat only a donut for lunch. In the lunchroom, you can see that some children hide their lunch in a newspaper when they eat at lunchtime because they eat only a donut or something they do not want their schoolmates to see. These kids, in most of the cases, do not do their homework. They spend their time watching TV, or walking around shopping malls with their parents on weekends. They have no real supervision at home. In other words, these children come from homes where parents are struggling with work and other personal problems.

Later, in my interview with Diougrand, he also notes:

L’absence des parents peut aussi être cause par le fait qu’ils sont peut être submergés pour la survie quotidienne tel que l’emploi et leur manque d’instruction pour aider dans l’éducation de leurs enfants. The non–participation of parents may be because they are preoccupied with other daily challenges, including employment and the lack of knowledge on how to support their children’s education.
School Barriers

Individual barriers are only some of the impediments that Black francophone parents face. Layer of barriers mentioned by the four participating teachers is found at the school level. Essentially, teachers identify two key school-related barriers: the lack of Black representation in the ranks of teachers (issue raised by the two Black teachers) and the effect of the Ontario’s new curriculum.

Lack of Black teachers.

The lack of Black teachers in French-language schools is an ‘image’ problem that teachers, especially the Black teachers, in this research identify as a barrier to the involvement of Black francophone parents in the school. Speaking about the school’s image, Diougrand states that, “In my school of over twelve teachers and four teacher-assistants, there are only two Black teachers and no racial minority teacher-assistants. I believe that our small representation is problematic for many Black parents because they do not see themselves represented proportionally in the teaching staff and in the school population. From my teaching experiences, I can tell you that usually parents feel more comfortable with a teacher with whom they share similar racial or cultural backgrounds, and Black children feel comfortable with me. Because I am a Black teacher, I am sure this encourages children to say, ‘I can also be a teacher like him’. [Black] children are more likely to look at the teaching profession positively, if they see more Black teachers in school. If there are few [Black] teachers, then this begs the question, ‘Do children see themselves represented proportionately in their school?’ If the answer is ‘no’, then, what message are we sending to these kids?’” To illustrate his point, and highlight the need for role models, Diougrand recounts this experience:

Un jour, une fille noire de 6e

One day, a Grade 6 Black girl
année m’a écrit : ‘je suis dans cette école depuis la maternelle. Tu es le premier noir qui m’a enseigné, et le premier homme qui m’a enseigné. Cela me rend réellement confortable. Ça m’encourage de travailler fort et réussir aussi.’ Par-dessus tout, ce genre de témoignage indique qu’il y a bien des enfants qui voit en moi un rôle modèle, et qui se disent ‘Tiens, moi aussi je peux devenir enseignant si j’ai une bonne éducation et le soutient de mes parents.’

wrote me a note saying, ‘I have been attending this school since Junior Kindergarten. You are my first Black teacher and the first male teacher. This really makes me feel good about myself. It encourages me to study hard and to succeed’. Above all, this kind of story makes me realize that there are definitely children out there who see me as a role model, and who say, ‘If I get the right education, and if I have the support of my parents, then I can be a teacher, too.’

The aforementioned story is symptomatic of the need for Black teachers as role models in French-language schools that is, people children can identify with or people from whom they can learn specific things. Some scholars have questioned the need for role models (see Dei, 1995; James, 2000). Dei (1995, p. 107), for example, argued that, "Any teacher could effectively give encouragement to students," and James (2000, p. 92) contended that, “The conceptualization and practices of role modeling are part of a hegemonic system in which educators inadvertently participate that encourages young people to conform to prevailing values, roles, expectations, and beliefs about the educational system.” Diougrand’s story underscores the need for these schools to work hard in partnership with everyone who can make a difference to the lives of
children to build genuine alliances based on mutual respect with Black parents, teachers and the communities. It is by doing this that these schools may be able to start seeing a difference in the parental involvement of Black francophone parents.

**School curriculum.**

As already identified by some parents, teachers too share the view that the Ontario curriculum is a barrier for some parents. Although the new curriculum is a government-mandated document, some parents fail to make that distinction and find the new curriculum difficult to the point that they are unable to help their child academically with their homework. Bellhumeur reports that some parents do not understand the mathematics that is assigned to their children and, as a result, they cannot help their children with their math assignments. Patricia’s comments mirror that of Bellhumeur. She observes, “Even with my many years of teaching experience, I am surprised that so many parents complain about the new curriculum. Some parents say that it is too difficult, and others say that it needs some ‘tweaking’ so that it can take fully into account the needs of all kids, including those who are coming from a completely different educational system. Patricia’s personal view of the curriculum is that the programme in itself does not constitute a systemic barrier to the involvement of Black parents in school. For her, parents are simply not educated enough to understand the curriculum. Diougrand, on the other hand, believes that teachers need to develop a better understanding of their students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and consider this during their daily interactions and activities with these children. This suggests that some teachers may be indifferent to the needs of their students. Diougrand illustrates this point:

> Une situation que j’ai vécue la session dernière concernait un A case that I experienced last semester was about a Black
étudiant-enseignant noir qui était venu pour sa formation dans notre école. Comme d’habitude, les enseignants sont libres de superviser les étudiant-enseignants, et pour cela il suffit simplement d’en faire la demande à la direction de l’école. Dans ce cas-ci, moi j’ai fait la demande. Non seulement celle-ci n’a pas été acceptée, mais le directeur ne l’a pas du tout apprécié non plus, et cela sans aucune explication valable. Ce genre de chose montre les difficultés qu’un enseignant noir fait face à l’école.

Bellhumeur also observes that Black francophone parents and their children are often “in the dark,” when it comes to their educational future. In alluding to her experience in another school, she argues that, “Because some parents do not know the system, their kids are often streamed into vocational programs and other non-academic classes. Unfortunately, since most of these parents are not involved in their children’s education, they believe that the school is making the best educational decisions for their children, but they are sometimes unaware that the prescribed educational programs are non-academic tracks.”
Summary

This chapter was a continuation of the previous chapter, which described Black francophone parents’ understanding of the meaning of parental involvement in the schools, and the extent of their involvement in their children’s education. The first section of this chapter described what the study’s eight participating parents perceived as barriers to their involvement in their children’s schools. These barriers included societal barriers, school structural barriers, barriers deriving from government legislations, individual barriers, and those related to colonial education. The next section provided comprehensive detail on how three francophone community leaders perceive the participation of Black francophone parents in the school system. Lastly, teachers in the school involved in this research gave similar opinions in the third section.

Although all of the parents were mostly silent regarding their extent of involvement in their children’s education, they all overwhelmingly identified racism and marginalization as two of the main culprits for their non-participation in school. The data further revealed that there was still a widespread perception in schools that Black francophone parents did not know enough about the educational system to be able to navigate it themselves. This was poignantly illustrated in Moriba’s statement, “I think many teachers believe that Black parents are not knowledgeable and educated enough to understand the school system; they view us as specimens from another era, and you know what I am referring to.”

Although some of the barriers identified in this section were documented elsewhere in the literature, the interview data in this section indicated clearly that barriers to the involvement of racial minority francophone parents were not the same as those experienced by the dominant group. In essence, the effect of the inversion of roles between Black Francophone men and women of African origin in Canada, and the negative impact of racism and other forms of
discrimination, noted by the respondents, were reported as just a few of the differentiating barriers between Black francophone parents and those from the dominant group.

Despite the many interwoven barriers mentioned by Black parents, the study also revealed that an examination of what prevents these stakeholders from school involvement needed to be placed in the context of parents’ country of origin because not all French-speaking parents have the same social and educational experiences prior to and after immigrating in Canada.

The section on community leaders highlighted several factors including, but not limited to individual as well as school structural barriers that prevent Black francophone parents from being involved in their children’s education. Of the individual barriers that community leaders identified as cause for concern for parental involvement, three stood out; first, parents’ lack of awareness of the importance of their role in the education of their children; second, the blind spot approach that parents have regarding their responsibility in their children’s education; and third, the lack of spiritual connectedness of parents. Rarely discussed in the literature, this latter barrier is, in the words of one of the community leaders, “a self-erected barrier that destroys transformative effects that come with spirituality in society.”

While the three community leaders in this research saw parents’ misunderstanding of the educational system in Canada as one of the significant barriers to their involvement in the school, the same leaders acknowledged that their own limited resources and the lack of government support were preventing them from doing more for their community members. As this section also illustrated, community leaders believed that parents needed to be first aware of their own responsibilities and limitations concerning their children’s education. The section also suggested that community leaders were generally cognizant of their members’ educational needs; however,
involving these parents is indeed a “tough battle to win,” because many of them are uninformed about the Canadian school system, which is a provincially—not federally—run system. Moreover, although leaders in Black francophone communities might be able to help parents become involved in their children’s education, they are not necessarily the first to be called upon when it come to involvement in school.

The research data presented in the latter part of this study revealed that teachers, too, were aware that Black parents encounter barriers, and even marginalization within the school, when it comes to being involved in their children’s education. Accounts of the four teachers who participated in this study showed that these barriers either derived from the parents themselves or were directly related to the school. In the teachers’ opinion, the lack of parental control and the lack of cooperation between the parents and the school had a negative impact on the involvement of Black parents in French-language schools. While some teachers viewed the “laissez-aller” attitude of some Black francophone parents and their lack of control of their children as barriers to parental involvement in the school, others were of the opinion that government policies and practices were the main reasons that deter some parents from becoming involved in their children’s education.

Teachers were generally willing to help parents, but racial minority teachers felt that they were victims of systemic, yet subtle, barriers in school. These teachers argued that systemic challenges hindered them from playing a significant role and, hence, having a noticeable impact on the degree of involvement of Black parents in school. Teachers, especially the Black ones, believed that they did not generally have the support of their peers; that their work environment was, to paraphrase one of the teachers, “poisonous, like a jungle where our own voices were silenced, where we could not count on the school principal or on our colleagues.” It was also
revealed that racialized teachers face other professional challenges within the educational system, and the teachers’ accounts may have proven that these challenges may explain why some teachers are unable to better support Black francophone parents.
Chapter Six:
Discussion

Introduction

The findings of this research study confirm previous findings regarding minority parents’ perceptions about the schooling of their children. That is to say that the meaning of school involvement for Black francophone parents and the barriers they face vary widely. The eight Black francophone parents in this study are concerned with their children’s education and their views about involvement in schooling range from equating involvement with instilling the value of hard work in their children to playing a more visible role in their children’s schooling. While most of the participating parents have differing views and their home-based involvement activities seem to go unnoticed to teachers, the view of these parents nevertheless differ from those of mainstream parents of the dominant White francophone population. Their cultures and socio-economic backgrounds are different. They have experienced different schooling and integration challenges. In this chapter, I discuss the accounts of the study’s participants in terms of what the literature says, and in relation to the relationship among the home, the school, and the community. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part will focus on parents’ understanding of their role in schooling in relation to instilling in their children the value of hard work and spiritual connectedness. The second part will examine two forms of racism (racism within educational institutions and outside the school system). The data illustrate that both forms of racism alienate Black francophone parents from the French-language school system. This alienation reinforces the negative feelings that Black francophone parents harbour toward Ontario White Francophones.
Instilling the Value of Hard Work in Children

The parents’ accounts in the data analysis demonstrate that Black Francophones are not fully cognizant and appreciative of the many and varied forms of non-traditional support that they are engaged in on daily basis. This is partly due to the fact they have been taught and pre-conditioned to view parental involvement in school from the dominant group’s normative perspective. In other words, these parents understand involvement in school as the enactment of specific scripted school activities. However, some parents do view instilling their strong work ethic and other values in their children as a form of involvement in their children’s education. Therefore, I was not surprised when a few participants in the study referred to the medium of “hard work” as a form of contribution / support to their children’s schooling. In listening to the participants, I assumed that they were drawing on their own lived experiences in supporting their children’s schooling. As such, it may be argued that these parents have learned two lessons: first, that life is not what you think it is; and second, without working hard in school, their children may experience life as a never-ending struggle.

Life: Reality Versus Dream

A few Black parents in this study have indicated that they could see themselves foregoing personal leisure in order to participate fully in their children’s education. These parents are fully aware of the need to educate their children about life because they believe that their children are likely to stray from their parents’ cultural values, which include a strong work ethic. Although Black children are often viewed as under-achievers in school, their parents (like those of the dominant culture) do want them to succeed; as such, these parents try to instil in their children the values of hard work in any undertaking. To borrow from James (2008, p. 238), education is perceived as an “escape route from social class problems and gendered oppression.” From the
vantage point of Black francophone parents, the cultural heritage of immigrants tends to be annihilated by the dominant culture in Western society. Therefore, they believe that their children need ongoing education about their own cultural values and the advantages of being guided by these cultural teachings.

This study revealed that Black parents want their children to understand that success involves hard work. For Lajoie, a father of two who grew up in a mostly farming village in West Africa, and who used to tend to his family’s herd of sheep, this aspect of inculcating traditional values in children is integral to parental involvement in school. This means that the term “involvement in school.” as it is defined traditionally, does not apply to all parents. Unfortunately, parental involvement in school has been historically confined to scripted roles of parents in school, instead of recognizing non-traditional activities, such as those that Black parents and other racial and ethnic minorities routinely practice for the betterment of their children’s life. For some Black francophone parents, helping a child to become a better person and to teach him / her how to respect their elders is a form of involvement in the child’s education. This illustrates, again, that Black parents’ view and understanding of involvement go far beyond the pre-defined parameters of involvement in school in the literature. Parents from the dominant culture may not necessarily share the same understanding, but for Black parents, these terms are integral to their cultural backgrounds.

Most, if not all, of today’s Black francophone parents are immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. Like other immigrants, they had dreams and high aspirations prior to immigrating to Canada. Many of these Black Francophoons, however, have continued to face many challenges, some of which have deprived them of resources to support their children’s education in conventional ways. As a result, some of these parents have become “shadow” parents (Gabikini,
2005) even though they do not acknowledge that reality. I found in this research that there are Black parents who seem to take little or no action to counter the label “shadow.” These shadow parents may be concerned about their children’s future, but their seemingly inaction and total lack of involvement in their children’s schooling reinforce the notion of “shadow” parents.

*No Adequate Compensation Without Working Hard*

In many traditional African societies, teaching the values of hard work to children is regarded as vital for the future of a child, regardless of whether the task is in the field, in an office, or in the classroom. There is a shared belief that working hard in life is important for the family’s daily life, and that it can serve as a motivational tool for parents to encourage their children to stay in school. Children who stay in school and work hard are believed to be able to break out of the cycle of poverty. Many Black francophone parents adhere to that viewpoint and as Moriba contends, “A child who chooses to stay in school acquires tools and knowledge that shields him / her against poverty.” That means that not dropping out of school, working hard, and being resilient equips children with the necessary skills to succeed in life. Although there may be disagreements about what it means to be successful (Nieto, 2004), working hard, as I mentioned earlier, is viewed by some Black francophone parents as a surest path for personal fulfilment in life, or as Codjoe (2007, p. 144) puts it, “The only mobility channel for success in Canadian society”. Indeed, many immigrant parents are convinced that as long as one has the brains and willing to work hard, then education is ultimately, what will enable children to gain respect in society.

For Black francophone parents, teaching children the value of hard work cannot be overstated enough. For Sekou, one of the participating community leaders who knows first hand the value of hard work because he paid for his ticket to Canada only after working hard in
different European countries, “Parents have the moral responsibility to pass on to their children the good teaching that their parents taught them. This is how one becomes a good and responsible citizen, and how a child earns honesty in his life with his own sweat. This is also how a child guards himself from mischief.” Sekou and other Black francophone parents’ story in Ontario are defined by hard work and persistence. Some of these immigrants have bypassed opportunities to further their education and preferred to work instead. They see their story as that of those who have been strategic in their efforts to teach their children to work as hard as they themselves do, but always encouraged their children to stay in school. In an earlier quote, Centranze suggested a similar viewpoint regarding the relationship between Black parents and the French-language schools. In fact, Sekou’s socio-cultural orientation toward work is so ingrained, so taken-for-granted, that when I asked him why it was so important to teach this concept to children, his response was to restate simply the obvious: “Because it works!” In other words, for Sekou, Centranze and other Black francophone parents, hard work is such a fundamental fact that it warrants no explanation. For these Black francophone parents, work communicates certain lessons about life. They hope that inculcating work ethic would communicate to their children the importance of staying in school, or at least make them realize that their options in life would be limited should they choose not to continue their education. It is worth noting that while Black francophone parents put high value on school, they never put a negative value on work, and always try to make the connection with the relationship with the French-language schools.

As I mentioned earlier, many parents view the inculcation of the values of hard work as a way of being involved in their children’s education. For some parents, not teaching children the value of hard work in or outside the school means that their children could just end up like many
immigrants struggling to put food on the table, and working two or three jobs even on weekends. This also explains why some Black francophone parents choose to work at the expense of their children’s education. It can also mean that Black francophone parents rely on their experiences as children when growing up in Africa, and as immigrants within another linguistic minority to determine what it would take their children to achieve their educational and career goals as they did.

As demonstrated throughout the data, parents and community leaders in this study make a link between involvement in school and raising their children in accordance with their own values, which include a good work ethic. They want to open their children’s eyes to the realities of life (Lopez, 2001). They want their children to be “go-getters,” benevolent, committed, dependable, efficient, fair, and willing to learn in life. Lajoie sums up what Black parents really want for their children, “Our kids’ success in [French-language] schools is not when everybody says ‘the school is…’ but when we say our school is” or as Dei (1996) noted, it is when “The African child sees and interprets the world through her or his own eyes, rather than through those of the other” (p. 170). Lajoie stressed on “our” as if he wanted me to know that he is not yet part of the school; he cannot identify himself with it, or as if there were invisible barriers that prevent all parents from participating in French-language schools.

Interestingly, in addition to valuing hard work for their children, it worth noting that in this study, the differing views of Black francophone parents regarding parental involvement in school was also illustrated in the link that participants make with their own spirituality. From some of the participants’ perspective, spirituality is deemed crucial in involving parents in their children’s education. Although spirituality is an elusive term which cannot be captured in any neat definition (Wane, 2002), some Black Francophones tend to view spirituality based on the
teaching they received in childhood. Although traditional research pays little attention to the role of spirituality in schooling (see Dei, 2002; Palmer, 2003; Suhor, 1999; Wane, 2002), some parents’ decision to become involved in their children’s education is sometimes tied to their religious beliefs. These parents believe that spirituality and schooling cannot and must not be dissociated. Thus, for Sekou, “You cannot be involved in something if you do not believe in it.” This implies that parents must first believe that their presence in school will make a difference in the way the school is run and how it perceives parents favourably. In the view of parents like Sekou, the term “belief” calls for parents to be spiritually connected. As he mentioned earlier, it is through spirituality that parents can engage themselves and their children. In other words, spirituality and schooling should complement each other.

**Double Racism: It Disproportionately Affects Black Francophones**

Despite the illusion of openness toward and acceptance of all races in Canadian society, there is racism² at all levels of society and this is highlighted in the findings of this study. Although institutional racism occurs within the different structures of society, for the purpose of this discussion, institutional racism refers to the discriminatory and racial practices that take place within the French-language education system. Institutional racism can be read in the structure of the school through the hidden curriculum – through the attitudes, actions and behaviours of educators and other school personnel. I discuss the relationship between institutional racism and the perception of Black francophone parents. Forms of personal

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² Racism is the use of institutional power to deny or grant people and groups of people rights, respect, representation and resources based on their skin color. Racism in action makes Whiteness a preferred way of being human. By whiteness I am referring to the civilization, language, culture and the skin color associated most often with Europeanness. Racism is reflected in a hierarchy in which beauty, intelligence, worth and things associated with Whiteness are at the top.” Enid Lee, “Anti-Racism Education: Pulling Together to Close the Gaps”, in Beyond Heroes and Holidays, 1998, p. 27.
discrimination that parents experience within the school boundaries are major barriers to Black francophone parents’ becoming involved in their children’s schooling.

I argue, in this section, that the racism that Black francophone parents experience within (and outside of) the school system affects their perceptions about their children’s schooling as well as their decision to become involved or uninvolved in school-based activities. Racism also affects how parents view their own place and that of their offspring in Canadian society. Here, I also contend that the disengagement of Black francophone parents from school-based activities, attributed to institutional racism, is more intense compared to the racism that Black parents experience outside the school boundaries. The reason for this may be grounded in the fact that Black francophone parents tend to view racism, experienced outside the school system, as the norm for people of colour.

**Institutional Racism**

Most Black francophone parents immigrate to Canada with little or no exposure or understanding of racism in its varying forms and manifestations. Nevertheless, parents’ unfamiliarity with racism in their country of origin, coupled with the challenges they face in navigating the White dominant culture, should not hamper their involvement in their children’s education. Yet, as pointed out by the participants, Black Francophones tend to be regarded in French-language schools as “uninformed, unconcerned,” and even “aggressive” when they interact with school personnel. From the parents’ vantage point, school personnel also tend to use inappropriate and discriminatory language when dealing with parents and perceive them as not subscribing to the school’s norms and values, which are generally those of the dominant group ethos. This pervasive and well-known attitude in French-language schools often leads some Black parents to conclude that school officials implicitly support racism by blatantly ignoring it.
Feeling unwelcome in the school environment, Black francophone parents perceive that their lives and those of their children are not valued in the education system. This feeling of being unworthy and unvalued in the school is particularly painful, when a formal complaint from a Black parent about acts of racism is ignored and not investigated, without explanation. From the school officials’ point of view, the school treats parents equitably when it comes to applying the board’s policies and practices. For Black francophone parents, however, the school personnel’s attitudes towards them reflect hidden and untold practices that minority parents experience, on a regular basis, in their interactions with the French-language school system. As a result, one may question the genuineness of displays of openness and inclusiveness within the school and their impact on minority parents’ involvement in their children’s education.

In addition, the unfair treatment of Black francophone parents within the school system, underscores their status as outsiders who are unable to relate to the social order of the institution. This “otherness” of parents, coupled with institutional pressures to have parents conform to normative expectations of the school marginalizes and alienates Black francophone parents within the French-language school system. For many Black Francophones, the attitude of White Francophones – with its insistence that Black francophone parents conform to their values and mores – is viewed as perpetuation of cultural imperialism (Young, 1990). Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experiences and culture, and its establishment as the norm (p. 59).

In spite of the fact that the two participating schools and their umbrella public district school board, the Conseil scolaire de district du Centre Sud-Ouest, portray themselves as inclusive and welcoming, this public representation only obfuscates racial bias which, according to participants in this study is rampant, undeniable and unmistakable in many ways. As noted
earlier by Janine’s account, when she put her name forward for the position of school trustee in her riding, the fact that her application remained unacknowledged illustrates that the French-language educational system discriminates deliberately and systematically against racialized parents. Moreover, it reinforces the perception that there may be other untold and hidden practices in these institutions, which tell racialized parents they are not welcome in the Franco-Ontarian school system.

Institutional racial discrimination against Black Francophones is also discernible in discourses. Although racial discriminatory discourses in educational institutions are difficult, if not impossible, to validate, Black Francophones often complain about derogatory racial slurs they are subjected to in French-language schools. For example, when Doucette referred to earlier to the use of the “N” word, school officials in response to her complaint took no actions. This inaction of the educational institution may have alienated her further from the school system. I can even argued that the use of the “N” word in a public arena like a school demonstrates that a “colonial mentality” is still alive in the corridors of French-language schools and that school officials are co-conspirators in its continuance. From the narratives of this study, this mentality leads some Black parents into thinking that the spaces in French-language schools continue to serve as venues where Black parents are treated as inferior human beings who must interact with French schools under the terms of the institutions—in a colonizer-colonized relationship—that subject their children to a prison-like environment. Since there is no division between reality and the language we use to describe that reality, I can conclude that the use of racial discourses in institutions and by extension in society, coupled with the institutional colonial mentality deter Black francophone parents from becoming involved in their children’s school.
As evidenced by the accounts of the participants, Black parents perceive Francophone educational institutions as places where White Francophones are unwilling to acknowledge their racist attitudes. Unlike in other areas of society, where racism can be blatant and direct, racism in French-language schools is often subtle and pernicious. The perniciousness of racism can be found in the use of code words like ‘immigrants’, ‘parlez-français’, ‘ce n’est pas comme en Afrique’, which are evoked in a demeaning way to racial Francophones. French-language schools truly believe that they are open and welcoming until a Black parent or a person of colour points out an act of racism in the school. It is the reality, for example, that when Black parents indicate their willingness to participate in school activities, school personnel often treat them as nuisance to be tolerated and responsible for their children’s failure. This attitude, in turn, makes parents wary about their relationship with the school. In this study, both Moriba and Janine indicated that: “Parents are reluctant to share information with schools about family circumstances because they think that they will not be listened to and that teachers might use personal family data to confirm negative expectations and stereotypes.” This indicates that some Black francophone parents do not trust school authorities when it comes to sharing confidential information. They fear that instead of using confidential information gathered from minority parents to help them with their children’s schooling, the school uses the information against them.

Exclusionary hiring practices in French-language schools prevent Black Francophones access to the teaching profession, even though these Francophones have successfully fulfilled all requirements of the Ontario College of Teachers (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). Consequently, many Black teachers become disillusioned with the French-language education system and eventually choose to teach French as a second language in English district school
boards. When it comes to the lack of hiring Black teachers, French-language public schools are no different from the French-language Catholic schools according to the participating Black teachers.

Furthermore, exclusionary practices in learning activities that some educators engage in in the classroom are another important aspect of institutional racism. The role of teachers is particularly important in stopping institutional racism (Codjoe, 2001, Dei, 1995, 1996; Thomson, 1989). Teachers are assumed not only to teach, but also to instil in children a sense of moral responsibility, honesty, and integrity and decency, irrespective of their backgrounds and to provide guidance, mediation, management and emotional support (Eilon & Kliachko, 2004). They are also supposed to encourage every child they teach to work hard and to excel in their preferred subjects and activities, including extra-curricular activities that would enhance their overall performance in the school (see Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Monzo & Rueda, 2001). To paraphrase Dei (2008, p. 113), parents expect teachers to be committed to their students’ needs and concerns, and students expect teachers to give respect and space to everyone’s embodied difference, knowledge and voice in the spirit of creating a space of multiple knowings. In doing this research, I found out form the participants’ accounts that teachers, with the tacit go-ahead of the school leadership, occasionally carry out dubious exclusionary practices, which may not be obvious to students and parents. Teachers who harbour racist attitudes and other forms of differential treatments can affect adversely Black students in a more personal way as low expectations (Codjoe, 2001). It is worth mentioning, however, that some Black francophone parents are cognizant of this reality. The account of one of the study’s respondents illustrates this point: “One of my colleagues who likes arts and is good at it routinely uses Black children to play demeaning or menial roles (e.g., a cook, slave, etc.), in the school’s plays. He may not be
mindful of the negative impact that this portrayal has on these kids. He probably thinks that a Black kid is better suited for such representations. However, from the kids’ and the parents’ perspective, this is an obvious form of racial discrimination because the kid is being portrayed in a secondary role that is publicly viewed as demeaning.”

As Dei (1996, p. 15) argues, every educator should speak out boldly on racism, one of the pertinent educational issues of our time, and to be able to articulate a clear and purposeful vision for educating both young and old for the future. Yet, every time minority youths / school children get into arguments about their racial, ethnic, cultural or social identities, school leadership and school administrators, including teachers, most likely deal with them in a seemingly differentiated way. That is why Dei (1996) advocates for ten principles of anti-racism education that are relevant in schools.3 Institutional power is often used to discriminate and deny

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3 Anti-racism principles enunciated by Dei (1996) are:
1. Anti-racism education recognizes the social effects of race. Despite the concept’s lack of scientific basis, in a White dominated society the notion of race bears a significant meaning to racialized groups because it serves to discriminate and unequally differentiate them in their daily lives.
2. To understand the social effects of race, one needs to comprehend the intersections of all forms of social oppression, including how race is mediated with other forms of social difference.
3. White (male) power and privilege and the rationality for dominance in society must be questioned for several reasons.
4. The marginalization of certain voices in society and especially in the delegitimation of the knowledge and experience of subordinated groups in the education system is problematic.
5. Every form of education must provide for a holistic understanding and appreciation of the human experience, comprising social, cultural, political, ecological and spiritual aspects.
6. Students do not go to school as “disembodied” generic youths, therefore, it is important for educators to understand how students’ racial, class, gender, disabilities and sexual identities affect and are affected by the schooling process and learning outcomes.
racialized and marginalized parents in the school system. It is worth noting that school councils in French-language schools are infamous for having parents who are mostly representatives of the [White] Franco-Ontarian community and, therefore, implicitly denying Black francophone parents their rights to participate in a meaningful way in these councils (see Bélanger et Wilson, 2000; Heller, 1997; Heller et al., 2000). This denial is always subtly carried out by the parents of the dominant group (i.e., the White Francophones). These parents generally control the council and determine who sits on its executive committees, or what position other parents can occupy on the council. This systemic discrimination renders Black parents voiceless and irrelevant in the operation of their children’s schools. In other words, the absence of Black parents’ voice in school councils is indicative of their exclusion from the structure of power, where decisions are made. As Sunderji (1996, p. 135) noted, “This systemic exclusion is the consequence of a status quo that bestows on the White majority power and privilege – birthrights not always obvious to those blessed with them.” As a result, many Black francophone parents are resigned to accept that they are indeed unwanted in French-language schools. It is of note that many other immigrant parents hold a similar view with respect to their relationship with the school (see Dei, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; López, 2001, 2003; Peña, 2000; Shaw, 1998).

7. There is a need for an inclusive education system that is capable of responding to minority concerns about public schooling.

8. The role of education in producing and reproducing racial, gender, sexual, and class-based inequalities in society must be acknowledged.

9. School’s problems experienced by the youth cannot be understood in isolation from the material and ideological circumstances in which the students find themselves.

10. Pathological explanations of the family or home environment as a source of the problems some youths experience in relation to schooling are questionable.
As noted earlier, racism through marginalization of Black Francophones in school is insidious and has the perverse effect of moving them further from becoming involved in their children’s schooling. Institutional marginalization can take various forms including:

- Schools’ absenting children’s first language and cultural artefacts from public displays (e.g., public notices, welcoming signs, classrooms and corridors wall displays of children’s works, etc.);

- Schools allowing, by their inactions, other children (generally White children) to make a fun of Black children’s traditional foods during lunchtime;

- Teachers ignoring Black children’s presence in the classroom (e.g., avoiding eye contact, not allowing or encouraging children from immigrant families to ask questions);

- The systemic imposition of curriculum that is culturally biased;

- The school assessing children’s capabilities and achievement on entry through a language in which the child is not yet fluent.

Institutional discrimination against Black Francophones in French-language school is practiced also under the disguise of applying Ministry of Education’s policies. One such example is the Ministry of Education’s Safe Schools Act. The Ontario government trumpeted the development and implementation of a comprehensive Code of Conduct in 2000 to make Ontario’s schools safer and create a more respectful environment. This Code of Conduct policy, which has been legislated under the Safe Schools Act, has been deemed ineffective and biased by many educational stakeholders. As I mentioned earlier, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) alleges, on behalf of racialized students and students with disabilities, that the
application of the Safe Schools Act negatively affects a disproportionate number of racial minority students and those with disabilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2006). In other words, the Safe Schools Act does not respect differences in school communities, nor does it treat children with dignity and respect at all times even when there is disagreement. Pouring out her feelings about the Act and the suspension of one of her children from school 2 years ago, Kankou states, “This new authority given to schools and teachers does nothing to help people like me to trust and participate in the school, because educators who are racists can now use it to punish or expel our children. That is what they do….” Kankou’s frustration with the Act is echoed in a 1992 study entitled Towards a New Beginning: The Report and Action Plan of the Four-Level Government: African Canadian Community Working Group (Toronto). This study concluded that:

Black students encounter discrimination daily on an individual level. They must deal with racial slurs, vicious graffiti, [and] ostracism on the part of their fellow students. Many feel that it is no use complaining to the authorities about this, since they believe that teachers and the administrators are themselves racist. (Dennisson et al., 1992, p. 72)

Keeping in mind how institutional racism affects Black parents, the next section will discuss how the other form of racism, that is racism outside the school system, affects Black Francophones.

**Racism Outside School Boundaries**

Canadians who were not born here and have accents or are visible for their skin colour are subject to more scrutiny when they enter [Canada]. That’s beyond question. (Toronto Star, 2009)

Racism not only exists in the schools, it is also a daily reality outside the educational system for Black Francophones. Elliot and Fleras (1992, p. 44) contends, “Our treatment of
racial and ethnic minorities since confederation has left much to be desired…the government and the general public have collaborated to discriminate against immigrants as threats to the prevailing order.” According to Irvine (1990, p. 4), “Racism and the devalued position of Blacks in our society cannot be ignored as a primary contributing factor to Black underachievement.” James (1996, p. 32) contends, “We must acknowledge that Canadian society as a whole suffers culturally, socially, and economically as a result of the pervasive racism and inequity that act as barriers to full participation of racial minorities in the workforce and in society.”

Racism in Franco-Ontarian’s society is central to the experience of Black Francophones. Therefore, understanding this centrality is crucial in how these parents, particularly the new ones negotiate in Franco-Ontarian’s society within which they are subject to daily negative experiences.

While blatant forms of racism have dissipated to some extent, covert expressions of bigotry and ‘polite’ racism and stereotyping remain in force. Racism is manifested in various forms in Franco-Ontarian society. These manifestations include practices, which consist of not recognizing the socio-economic contributions that Black Francophones have made (and continue to make) to the Franco-Ontarian society; using Black Francophones as statistical assets only to claim resources on behalf of Ontario’s French-speaking minorities; and rendering voiceless Black francophone organizations. Furthermore, White Francophones deny Black francophone organizations their fair share of those public resources that are allocated to all French-speaking community groups (see Madibbo, 2004) and marginalize these organizations within White francophone professional and social organizations.

Other forms of racist treatments by White Francophones entail the systemic denial of professional and educational credentials of Black Francophones in Canada (Quell, 1998). The
denial of credential is a form of racism, which severely affects not only the socio-economic integration of Black Francophones in Canada, but also their representation in francophone mainstream institutions (Strategic Research and Analysis, 2002). The non-recognition of credentials manifests itself by exclusionary practices engaged in by both the state and Francophone mainstream organizations. It is therefore directly associated with racism exerted within societal institutions. I need to emphasize here that not recognizing the credentials and professional qualifications of Black Francohones leads Black Francophones to believe that those who choose to further their education (and become qualified educators) will continue to be looked down upon in Francophone schools. This is why some Black parents choose not to return to school to gain or enhance their credentials.

As I pointed out earlier, most of the recent Black francophone immigrants to Canada choose to live in Ontario. Once in Ontario, these immigrants tend to gravitate toward Franco-Ontarian organizations (Quell, 1998). However, unlike White European Francophones and their offspring and Francophones from other countries living in Ontario, Black Francophones are denied recognition of their contributions and achievements within the Franco-Ontarian society because of their skin color. This double standard is seen by Black Francophones as another determining factor in their attitudes toward the White Francophone society.

Black Francophones initially identified themselves with ACFO [Association franco-ontarienne] and wanted to become part of the Franco-Ontarian society. As a result, they participated in many of ACFO’s earlier struggles for French-language minority rights. Unfortunately, they realized over time that the White Franco-Ontarians did not really want them as partners. Rather, they wanted to use Black Francophones solely for their public claims under constitutional linguistic minority rights. The minute the federal government gave them what they
wanted, they no longer needed Black Francophones. In that sense, Black francophones feel betrayed. The feeling of betrayal is especially true for those like Toufasson who immigrated to Ontario over 20 years ago. Toufasson worked (and continues to work) in numerous community and mainstream community organizations. He is the ‘community guy’ as he likes to be viewed. He understands why Black Francophones have the feeling of being betrayed by the Franco-Ontarian society. The feeling of betrayal is also supported in the labeling of Black Francophones in Franco-Ontarian and Canadian societies. In effect, in spite of being labeled in the mainstream as visible minorities, Black Francophones consider themselves as invisible minorities in the Franco-Ontarian society. They argue that they are invisible when they are not needed, but visible when Franco-Ontarians want to make themselves heard in either Ottawa or Queen’s Park.

Toufasson’s statement reveals two things: the struggle and expressed desire of Black Francophones to become part of the Franco-Ontarian society. First, Black Francophones have fought alongside White Francophones to preserve and promote “le fait français” in Ontario. Because of their efforts, they want their children to be accepted and respected by White Francophones. Regrettably, Black Francophones continue to receive little or no recognition for their efforts to promote the francophonie, nor do they receive any support from White Francophones when they themselves want to advance the Black francophone community’s agenda. Second, Black Francophones who choose to live in Ontario do so with the expectation that they will be accepted and integrated within Franco-Ontarian society with their cultural heritage intact. They realize, however, that because of racial prejudice, ignorance, and other forms of discriminations, they are unable to integrate fully into the Franco-Ontarian society.

Toufasson’s aforementioned viewpoint also reveals another concern, often expressed by Black Francophones, which pertains to the relation of power between White Francophones and
other racial and ethnic Francophones. This is particularly glaring when it comes to the allocation of federal resources to the French-speaking minorities in Ontario. Some Black Francophones regularly use terms like “disappointed” to describe their feelings regarding the control of power by White Francophones (see Madibbo, 2004). Since federal resources to linguistic minorities are allocated based on the population size of each linguistic minority group, Black Francophones are of the view that they are entitled to receive more funding to support their communities. They argue that the significant population of their children in the French-language educational system justifies their demand for more resources. In reality, however, little attention is paid to the needs of Black Francophones in relation to their demographic weight in schools. This is based on the belief of French-language schools’ officials that Black children are important insofar they justify the existence of these schools.

Black respondents in this study come from Francophonie countries. They feel that there are colonial legacies that perpetuate a “colonizer-colonized” relationship between themselves and White Francophones. For older Black Francophones, this feeling may have been internalized in a negative manner, and the racism that these Black francophone immigrants experience in the Franco-Ontarian society can be regarded as a remnant of slavery and colonialism.

**Summary**

This discussion chapter illustrates that racism is rampant in both French-language schools and in society. In spite of racial discrimination and other forms of marginalization toward Black Francophones, I can argue that these parents want the best for their children. They silently believe that education can provide their children with security, confidence, social mobility, and opportunities to rise up out of poverty. They also share the view that their children can eventually surmount the lower socioeconomic class status barriers in society that conspire to
limit their opportunities and frustrate their realization and ambitions. It is because of their beliefs that they instil the value of hard work in their children.

As pointed out earlier, in spite of the Black francophone parents’ optimism regarding what a good education can offer to their children, these parents are often faced with racist attitudes and discourses that are polite in appearance but pernicious in their consequences. This polite racism is especially evident when Black Francophone are turned down for jobs, promotions or accommodations on a regularly basis. Based on this, it can be said that the relationship between Black francophone parents and French-language schools is one of unspoken mistrust that can only deteriorate, first, if White Francophones do nothing to recognize and correct the mistreatment of Black parents. Second, French-language schools need to treat Black francophone parents as partners instead of viewing these parents as “others.” The time to build partnerships is now. Involving Black francophone parents cannot be a reality if they are segregated in decision-making processes.
Chapter Seven:  
Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations  
and Final Thoughts

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of my findings, conclusions derived from these findings and the literature, some recommendations based upon the findings, direction for future research, as well as my final thoughts.

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the involvement of Black francophone parents from Sub-Saharan Africa in their children’s education in two of Ontario’s publicly funded French language schools. Although the primary focus of this study was on parents, community leaders and teachers were also involved because of the critical role these stakeholders play when it comes to the schooling of Black children in publicly funded school system in these urban areas.

Data for this study were collected through open-ended interviews with 15 participants (8 parents, 4 teachers, and 3 community leaders). With the exception of two of the participating teachers who were White, all of the participants were from Sub-Saharan Africa. Using data obtained from the interviews, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Black francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in school?

2. What strategies do these parents employ to become involved in their children’s formal education?
3. What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of Black francophone parents’ involvement in their children’s formal education?

4. What inhibits or facilitates the participation of these parents in school?

5. How is the double-minoritized positioning of these parents implicated in the strategies they employ, their degree of participation, and the inhibitors and facilitators they experience?

**Review of Findings**

Of the narratives collected, this study confirmed that Black francophone parents hold differing views regarding their involvement in school. Parents seem to perceive involvement in school in terms of personal values that they can instil in their children, along with what they have learned from their own school experiences and other forms of home supports that they provide to their children. In other words, these parents’ understanding of what constitutes involvement in their children’s education challenges the discursive meaning given to involvement in school by educational institutions, governments and mainstream parents. The study demonstrated that the extent to which Black francophone parents of African origin are involved in school is unclear, because many of the participants were unable to articulate clearly their degree of educational support to their children. This suggests, in my opinion, that even if parents were likely to become involved in school, they would do so in a rather unorganized and sporadic manner.

In spite of parents’ differing views about involvement in school and their lack of sound strategies for involvement in their children’s education, the parents in this study were cognizant of the importance of taking into account cultural heritage that children bring to school when one speaks about involvement. The reference to children’s cultural backgrounds is not simply that
these Black francophone parents spoke disparagingly of French-language schools’ lack of sensitivity; rather, the point is that parents fear that their children would feel like they have no past if the school fails to teach them the values of their culture. Based on that, it is understandable that cultural awareness is what some parents would like to see firmly respected by schools before they can become involved.

This study also showed that teachers’ perception of how Black francophone parents understand involvement in school was open to discussion. In fact, according to the teachers, parental involvement should be restricted to parents’ participation in school-based activities. According to the literature, this is the perception that most mainstream parents have regarding involvement in school. In my opinion, the accounts of most of the teachers (with the exception of one teacher) implied that parents were not conscientious enough when it comes to their children’s schooling. I found this troubling and surprising because I had hoped that minority Black teachers would be more sympathetic in their view of Black parents’ involvement in school. I was even more surprised to learn that some Black francophone teachers were hesitant to help Black parents because they feared their actions could be perceived as extending preferential treatment to Black parents or worse, as engaging in reverse racial discrimination. In essence, I was expecting that racial minority teachers would have a more sympathetic perception when it comes to school involvement, but that is not the case.

Unlike the teachers, community leaders seem powerless in educating and helping parents become involved in their children’s education, and in their communities. The community leaders indicated that the root cause of their inability to help parents in their communities lies in lack of resources and other societal challenges they themselves face.
The second part of the findings of this study dealt with barriers (real or perceived) that prevent Black francophone parents of African origin from becoming involved in their children’s education. Similar to the literature on involvement of racial minorities in school, the parents in this study overwhelmingly pointed out that racism (based on skin colour and language) and other forms of marginalization and discrimination are the major deterrents that prevent Black francophone parents from becoming involved in school. All the participants indicated that racism is a subtle and insidious reality in Canadian social fabric, and that the French-language school system is no exception. Of course, there were other notable contributing factors; however, in my opinion, I can deduce from the narratives that how these parents are treated in school and in society primarily determine their decision to become involved or not to be involved in schools. Regardless of the form of involvement, Black francophone parents see their acceptance in French-language schools and in society, as human beings who can perform ably and on equal footing with White parents, as critical. Since racism permeates every aspect of our lives, I posit that race and racial discrimination must be taken seriously in order for parents to feel not only comfortable in the school system but also be able to contribute meaningfully to society.

Although racism was singled out as the most influential factor for the involvement of Black francophone parents in school, the parents mentioned other barriers. Some of these barriers are found in the literature, while others either are less known or are specific to Black francophone parents of African origin. Of these less known / specific barriers, it is noteworthy to mention the following six:

1. the impact of role inversion in the family;
2. parents’ unawareness of the importance of their role in the education of their children;
3. the *blind spot* approach of parents to schooling;
4. the absence of spirituality in parents’ lives;
5. the *laissez-faire* attitude of families when it comes to rearing their children; and

The parents reported that formal school involvement calls for both parents to be fully committed to their children’s education. In reality, Black francophone parents (particularly newcomers) seem unprepared for this role. I was told that it takes time and patience before parents can adjust to their new educational roles in Canada. The study also revealed that the non-involvement of many parents in their children’s schooling might be related to the fact that they are simply unaware of their role in their children’s schooling. There were also participants who mentioned that parents have a *blind spot* attitude toward schooling. By *blind spot* attitude, I mean that parents fail to acknowledge the need for involvement in school until they realize that it is too late.

Another important barrier that the participants mentioned pertains to the *laissez-faire* atmosphere in some Black francophone families. According to the participants, the ‘do what you want, when you want and how you want’ attitude of parents, in many families, hinders parents from helping their children. The issue with the “laissez-faire” attitude of Black francophone parents, though, is not that they want their children to behave the way they do; the point is that these parents are preoccupied with other societal challenges and are not understood nor supported by the school system.

The lack of spirituality was also revealed as a barrier with respect to parents becoming involved in school. As I explained earlier, some participants in this study felt that parents who are not spiritually connected are less likely to participate in their children’s schooling. I would
argue here that educators, too, must address the spiritual dimension of the school before some parents can become involved in school.

In conclusion, clearly, the issue of Black francophone parents examined in this study cannot hinge on blaming Black francophone parents. That said, since parental involvement in school is a multi-dimensional construct, the best to hope for is that schools, Black francophone parents, community leaders and educators come to acknowledge their individual responsibilities and act upon them in a collaborative manner. I am of the view that collaboration between educators and Black francophone parents must be one of the initial focuses of French-language schools in urban centres. Collaborations can serve to strengthen social capital in communities; they also enable schools and teachers to become important players in initiating and / or supporting socio-economic and political changes, aimed at addressing systemic racism and poverty and thereby promoting social justice (see Gillborn, 2005). Janine echoed the need for collaboration when she stated that, “Parents, children and teachers develop a deep reciprocal love and understanding of each other when they work together.” I would add that parents and educators need the support of all stakeholders because, as mentioned earlier, it takes a whole village to raise a child.

**Recommendations for More Involvement of Black Francophone Parents in Education**

The following recommendations are made based upon the findings and conclusions of this study, which sought to examine the involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s schooling. These recommendations are not exhaustive and should be interpreted with caution because of the study’s aforementioned limitations. These recommendations provide a glimpse of basic actions that French-language district school boards, schools, parents, and government could do to help children achieve success in school and in life.
School context: Providing relevant information to would-be-immigrant parents and newly-arrived immigrants.

As revealed throughout narratives of participants in this study, would-be-immigrant parents and newcomers need to be informed about the educational system of each province and territory. Although Canada has a decentralized educational system where each province and territory has one or two ministries in charge of education, it is crucial and necessary that parents know what to expect and to whom / where to direct their queries with respect to their children’s education. The concern of parents regarding the lack of information about the educational system before (or right after) they immigrate to Canada cannot be overstated since all the parents in this study mentioned that they have felt some degree of frustration and apprehension at one time or another. According to these parents, they were uninformed about the education system in Canada. Of paramount importance is information about the role of parents in school since Canadian society is one in which parental involvement in school is also a sign of caring for a child’s well-being. The hands-off policy in the immigrant’s country of origin, which is viewed as complete trust in the teachers and the school, can be construed as neglect or lack of interest in the child’s learning in Canada. One of the participants of this study, Bellehumeur, echoed this point when she noted that providing parents with information lays the groundwork for the involvement of Black francophone parents in school. She stressed that, “As an institution, the school should be more accessible to newcomers. These parents must be told about their responsibilities and obligations. For instance, they should be told that they have the right to come to their children’s schools and observe them at least one day, and see how the children spend their day.” Others, like Lajoie, reiterated this comment. In expressing his view regarding the importance of information, he repeated his opinion like a mantra: “L’information, l’information, et l’information! Une fois informé, ils pourront bien s’impliquer et comme ça on aura un école bien
diversifiée.” Loosely translated, when Black francophone parents are informed, they are more likely to become involved in their children’s education. For example, information for parents at entry-points should not be limited to questions such as “Parlez-vous français? Parlez-vous Anglais? Avez-vous un diplôme d’études supérieures?” It should entail such things as explaining what is a school council, the purpose of a school council, and how to participate in a school council. Since the concept of school council does not exist in the immigrant’s country of origin, this type of knowledge would be beneficial in making decisions with respect to their children’s education. Hence, providing educational information to parents prior to their arrival in the host country should be as systematic as it is for informing would-be-immigrant families about Canada’s harsh winter.

Similarly, providing parents with basic information about the Canadian educational system before (or right after) immigrating, immigrant parents should also be informed about social practices deemed unacceptable in Canada and which often cause tension between Black francophone parents (who are oftentimes new to the country) and the educational system.

To recognize the contributions and importance of Black Francophones in schools, French-language the school leadership must believe in the involvement of Black francophone parents by designating a supervisory officer responsible for integrating racial minorities into the educational system. Such a position would demonstrate that these institutions value and appreciate the presence of Black Francophones and other racial minority groups who make up a significant number of urban French-language schools.

Instead of resorting to deficit theories or blaming families and communities for the educational failure of Black children, French-language schools must develop a relational approach with parents and communities that meets the expectations of both the school and Black
francophone parents. This could begin with providing Black francophone families with information that would answer questions, such as what is a district school board, what is the role of a school council, what is the difference between these two, and how to become involved in school-based activities.

Educators must recognize that the involvement of minority parents in school is critical, and hence the need to engage their students’ parents by first taking steps to reach out to Black francophone families and their communities. They must work collaboratively with community leaders and other individual activists in the communities. Schools must ensure that staff members welcoming newcomers are well equipped to understand the cultural subtlety that each family brings to the school. To achieve this, French-language schools must be pro-active, not reactive, in forging partnerships / relationships or friendships (in the broader sense) with racialized communities. In other words, schools must reach out to these communities by communicating regularly (over the phone, in community-organized events, parents-teachers’ meetings, or in person) not only with parents but also with community leaders and other community representatives. The intent of these kinds of communication is to make community members feel comfortable with the school. Moreover, teachers must re-examine their own beliefs and attitudes towards minority parents and children.

French language schools should invest more resources for hiring racial minority teachers and administrative staff. In doing so, schools should not engage in “tokenism” with respect to employment of Black Francophones. Token hirings are often used to deflect attention from systemic barriers affecting Black Francophones. Therefore, when staffing decisions are being made, whether it applies to support staff or teachers, these decisions should be carried out with the utmost intention of making the staffing reflective of the cultural make-up of the school.
population. This is particularly important, since the lack of Black francophone teachers and senior school officials is one of the greatest deficits in French-language schools. This lack of Black teachers is significant since Black students and parents view Black teachers as role models. The term “role model” is used here to mean people (preferably from the same racial community) who can motivate children through actions and deeds to achieve their goals. In Celia Haig-Brown’s words (as cited in James, 2000, p. 92), “Role models are people from whom students can derive inspirations, with whom they choose to identify, and from whom they believe they can learn specific things.” Furthermore, from the vantage point of Black francophone parents, tokenism and the lack of Black individuals in positions of power in the school reinforce the idea that racial discrimination exists and is a systemic issue. This phenomenon deters community members from making valuable contributions to their children’s learning.

The French-language schools should be more accommodating with regard to working conditions and meeting hours for immigrant parents because these parents are generally faced with other specific socio-economic constraints including caring for children and negotiating more than one work schedule. For instance, a school can help underprivileged immigrant parents by giving them token to attend school meetings. To allow immigrant parents to attend school meetings, it can also ensure that such meetings take place on weekends.

In order to reach a majority of Black francophone parents of African origin, French language schools’ administrators must move beyond traditional forms of family involvement. As noted by Janine, French-language schools must utilize a number of planning strategies including surveying parents to find out what are the best times for workshops, what barriers exist for them in attending activities, and what community alternatives to the school venue (e.g., local worship or community center) would be accessible to them. According to Johnson (2001), some schools
have had significant success in holding parent activities at community meeting places. In situations where family members find it difficult to come to the school or a community venue, the school liaison officer can make a home visit. Home visits enhance trust and communication between school staff and families and help them learn about each other.

To support the government’s learning strategy regarding student achievement in literacy and numeracy, schools should have a mentoring / tutoring system in place for students from disadvantaged and new immigrant families. Mentoring is particularly important in that it prevents new immigrant families from making costly mistakes regarding integration in the host society. Un-coached immigrants are more likely to fall prey to unscrupulous work agencies that thwart the educational aspirations of their children in contrast to those who have received mentoring. Mentoring support mechanisms must be accompanied by a genuine commitment toward the success of participating families.

The findings of this study suggest that educators must focus on finding transformative ways to increase the involvement of Black francophone parents in the education of their children. In doing so, French-language schools must be sensitive to the needs that are specific to Black francophone parents (e.g., cultural and socio-economic conditions, lack of social network, etc.). For that to occur, schools / educators must connect with families and identify their needs in a respectful and nonjudgmental way (see Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, p. 279). To ease some of the anxiety some parents experience about not fitting in or being accepted by the dominant culture of the school, teachers should engage parents in face-to-face conversation prior or during the school year. This could also help to alleviate some of the barriers raised by parents in this study, by paving the way for open communication and a clear understanding of expectations throughout the school year.
Schools should adopt a proactive approach when dealing and communicating with their school communities. This strategy would allow both the school and the parents to better understand each other and resolve basic misunderstandings and misinformation regarding the education system and the involvement of parents in their children’s school. French-language educational institutions must also develop cross-cultural understanding with families as a basis for making schools more inclusive. To begin with, school personnel need to stop using derogatory language when interacting with minority parents. Instead, they need to set up high standards and expectations for everyone in the classroom and to think that everyone is capable of doing the work.

**Community context.**

Leaders of Black francophone communities must understand that leadership entails responsibilities; therefore, their support for parental involvement in school must be focused and ongoing. As implied from the narratives of this study, this means that community leaders must constantly be aware of their community members’ concerns. These concerns must then be forwarded in a timely fashion to appropriate school / government officials, and followed up.

Community leaders must strive to develop, in conjunction with appropriate educational institutions, linguistic oral and written communication tools in French, for Black francophone parents with limited French-language knowledge. As Lajoie noted, “these tools would break the wall of silence that many parents have when it comes to school.” They should also help their members understand the importance of spending daily time with their children and engaging in discussion of school activities, friends, interests, problems, and future goals.
**Individual context.**

Individual parents must accept and exercise full responsibility for their children’s education. To echo Sekou’s earlier statement, “it is a mandatory duty for each parent to fulfil that responsibility.” Put it differently, Black francophone parents must play a pivotal role in shaping the future for their children.

Black parents need to not only recognize but also accept and exercise basic responsibilities that are associated with education in Western societies. Moreover, they must be aware that some social practices of rearing children in their country of origin are unacceptable in most Western countries, including Canada. For instance, parents would benefit greatly from understanding the difference between spanking and child abuse; furthermore, patriarchal attitudes that exist within families prior to immigrating are not as striking in Canada. To sum up, parents must be prepared psychologically to meet new challenges including educational ones associated with immigrating to a new country.

**Government context.**

According to participants’ accounts in this study, economic security often take precedence over parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Therefore, governments should help low-income immigrant parents develop skills to meet basic obligations of family life and to foster children’s learning.

Teachers should receive training about children’s diverse cultural backgrounds in teachers’ college, and not just from the district school boards. In order to educate Black learners successfully, teachers need to be trained to successfully teach a multicultural and anti-racist curriculum (Codjoe, 2001, p. 369). Even after graduating from teachers’ college, teachers in French-language schools should periodically undergo a comprehensive cultural sensitivity
training, which should be part of their performance contract. It is critical that teachers learn to establish personal or close rapport with parents. This should not require a high level of commitment or participation. Teachers could make parents feel comfortable whenever the opportunity arises. For instance, at parents-teachers’ meetings, mid-year celebrations, etc., teachers could make parents know that they are partners, not foes. Teachers could also approach parents with a down-to-earth attitude, an attitude that says to parents, *hey, we are all in this together for the good of the children.* When teachers are committed to both Black parents and children, they are less likely to engage in preferential treatments when it comes to children and their parents.

Targeted funding should be provided to school boards to address the specific needs of children from high-need disadvantaged families. Children from newly arrived Black francophone families should be the principal recipients of this funding.

The representation of French-language parents into government-run parental bodies must not be restricted to the representation of White-francophone parents. These parents do not and cannot voice the concerns of Black Francophones; therefore, the government must seek representation of Black Francophones in its decision / advisory parental bodies directly from organizations that represent them. This will ensure a true, not cosmetic / proxy, representation of Black Francophones in these decision / advisory parental bodies.

Efforts should be made to ensure that inclusiveness involving French-speaking staff at senior management level of the Ministry of Education is more reflective of the make up of Ontario French-speaking population. This would be in line with not only the Ministry of Education inclusive approach, but also a testimony that the Ministry itself embraces and does not
shy away from removing systemic and discriminatory biases, which prevent some staff from reaching their full potential.

**The Need for More Research**

As I mentioned earlier there is no documented literature that critically examines the involvement of Black francophone parents in Ontario French-language schools. The findings of this study confirm the paucity of research in this area and suggest the need for further research. More research involving the perspectives of schools’ officials as well as children from Black francophone families would hone in on other facets of involvement of Black francophone parents in their children’s education.

**Final Thoughts**

It is not enough to invite a guest for dinner if you do not share with him/her what is on your plate. In other words, schooling Black francophone children in French-language educational institutions is not enough if school doors are closed to their parents. (A Guinean elder)

As I listened to the participants in my survey, the parents, teachers and community leaders who willingly participated in this study and who were drawing from personal experiences, I realized that I was learning a great deal about their own experiences. As I mentioned earlier, I came to this research as a Black Francophone with a fair degree of knowledge of Black parents. I am emerging from this yearlong study with better knowledge and understanding of the common struggle in which I see myself involved. In addition to our individual mundane tribulations, I share with most of my study participants a keen interest in
education and aspirations of our children, and more importantly the need to be treated fairly, like any other member of Canadian society.

We Black Francophones must undergo some ritualistic self-examination every morning we step out of our homes, kiss our loved ones, and head to work. Why is that? It is because of racism, which Elliot and Fleras (1992, p. 50) eloquently argued, “is as much a part of this country as moose, Mounties, and mountains.” There are countless untold racial-discrimination stories that we experience in Franco-Ontarian and Canadian society. The point to remember, though, is that we Canadians, considered as a society, have more things in common that can unite us. Therefore, instead of treating some people as inferiors and others as superiors, we have much to gain by understanding that our similarities bind us together. We should remind ourselves daily of our interdependence and our need to work together, which are captured in the following proverb: “I am because we are; and because we are, therefore I am.” This being said, the school system and the government have much to gain by embracing and facilitating the involvement of parents (irrespective of their backgrounds) in schools instead of discriminating against them.
References


McGrath, D. J., & Kuriloff, P. J. (1999). They’re going to tear the doors off this place: Upper-middle-class parent school involvement and the educational opportunities of other people’s children. *Educational Policy, 13*(5), 603 – 629.


Appendix A

Administrative Consent to the Director of the District School Board
(English)

Date []
Dear _____________

I am a doctoral candidate in the Theory and Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT and am currently planning a research project that will involve parents, principals and teachers in your district school board.

The purpose of the study is to investigate how Francophone parents of African origin are involved in their children’s formal education in the French-language elementary schools. Eight parents and four teachers will be needed to participate in this study. A balance between male and female participants will be sought.

The study involves interviews in which participants will be asked about their understanding of parents’ involvement in school, the nature of their involvement in school, the barriers they face, and the strategies they use in their involvement. Subjects will be well informed about the nature of the study and their participation, including the assurance that they may withdraw at any time. In addition, they may request that any information be eliminated from the project. Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm.

The information gathered will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the raw data. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, and communities cannot be identified. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

In order to conduct this project I require your written consent. If you agree, please sign the letter below and return it to me in the envelope provided. I would also need your assistance to gain access to school principals. If you agree, I would ask you to distribute the attached letter to principals. The letter summarizes the project and asks the principals to contact me directly. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxx or at xxxxxx. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jim Ryan at xxxxxx. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Django Keita   Dr. Jim Ryan   Office of Research Ethics
PhD Candidate, Theory and Professor, Theory and Telephone: (416) 946-3273
Policy Studies in Education Policy Studies in Education email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca
OISE/University of Toronto OISE/University of Toronto www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/index.html
Appendix B

Administrative Consent to the Director of the District School Board
(French)

Date [ ]
Madame, Monsieur:

Je suis un étudiant en doctorat au département de Theory and Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT. Je conduis présentement une étude qui impliquera des parents d’élèves, des directions d’école ainsi que des leaders de la communauté...

La recherche sera menée dans le but de compléter ma thèse de doctorat et éventuellement pour des articles de recherche. Elle impliquera la participation de huit parents, deux leaders de la communauté, et quatre enseignantes et enseignants. La participation à cette recherche est volontaire et les informations qui seront recueillies des participants seront confidentielles et strictement utilisées pour mieux comprendre l’implication des parents à l’école. Ces informations seront gardées en confidentialité dans un endroit bien gardé. Seuls le chercheur et son superviseur auront accès aux données de cette étude.

Cette étude va inclure des entrevues au cours desquelles les participantes et participants répondront aux questions ayant trait à l’implication des parents dans l’éducation de leurs enfants, leur degré d’implication, les obstacles à leur implication ainsi que les stratégies qu’ils emploient pour surmonter ces obstacles.

Les participantes et participants seront libres de mettre fin à leur participation à tout moment et ce, sans préavis ou conséquences. Par ailleurs, ils ne seront pas tenus responsables des omissions ou erreurs qui seront rapportées dans cette étude.

Les informations seront rapportées de manière à ne pas divulguer l’identité des participantes et des participants. Toutes les informations obtenues seront utilisées strictement pour des fins de cette recherche. Elles seront complètement détruites cinq ans après la fin de cette étude.

Je demande votre consentement dans le but de mener à terme cette recherche. Veuillez signer ci-dessous si vous acceptez cette demande et me faire retourner votre réponse dans l’enveloppe timbrée incluse. J’aurai aussi besoin de votre assistance pour avoir accès aux directions d’école. Si vous acceptez, veuillez distribuer la lettre ci-jointe aux directions d’école. Cette lettre résume le projet et demande aux directions d’école de me contacter directement. Si vous avez des questions, veuillez me joindre au numéro de téléphone xxxxxx ou au courriel xxxxxx. Vous pouvez aussi joindre mon superviseur Dr. Jim Ryan au numéro de téléphone xxxxxx. Merci d’avance de votre coopération et votre appui.

Veuillez agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l’expression de mes sentiments respectueux.

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Appendix C

Invitation Letter to School Principals

(English)

Date

Dear [Name of school principal]

I have been recently contacted by a doctoral student from the Theory and Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT who is planning to conduct a research on the involvement of immigrant Francophones of African origin in French-language schools. The student, Django Keita, has asked me to allow him to have access to you, school principals, for his research. Subsequently, he would like you to help him have access to other participants. The study will be carried out under the supervision of Dr. Jim Ryan of the same department.

This research will be conducted for the purposes of a PhD study and perhaps subsequent research articles. Its purpose is to investigate how Francophone parents of African origin are involved in their children’s formal education in the French-language elementary schools. Eight parents, two community leaders, and four teachers will participate in the study. Participation in this research is voluntary, and any information collected from participants will be kept confidential and will only be used to better understand and appreciate the benefits of parental involvement in schools. Only the researcher and his supervisor will have access to the research data.

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more about this study please contact directly the primary researcher. He can be reached by phone xxxxxx, email xxxxxx, or by mail: Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Sincerely,

Board Director [Name]
Appendix D

Lettre d’invitation aux directions d’école

(French)

Date

Aux directions d’école,

J’ai été récemment approché par un étudiant en doctorat du Département de la théorie et des politiques en éducation, IEPO-UT qui veut mener une recherche sur l’implication des parents immigrants Francophones d’origine africaine dans les écoles de langue française. L’étudiant du nom de Django Keita, m’a demandé de le permettre d’avoir accès à vous et éventuellement à d’autres participants pour son étude. Cette recherche sera conduite sous la supervision du professeur Jim Ryan du même département.

La recherche sera menée dans le but de compléter une thèse de doctorat et éventuellement pour des articles de recherche. Elle impliquera la participation de huit parents, deux leaders de la communauté, et quatre enseignantes et enseignants. La participation à cette recherche est volontaire et toutes informations qui seront recueillies des participants seront confidentielles et strictement utilisées pour mieux comprendre l’implication des parents à l’école. Seuls le chercheur et son superviseur auront accès aux données de cette recherche.

Si vous êtes intéressés à prendre part à cette recherche ou si vous désirez en savoir plus, je vous invite à contacter directement le chercheur principal. Il peut être joint en lui téléphonant au xxxxxx, par courriel xxxxxx ou en lui écrivant à l’adresse ci-dessous :
Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Veuillez agréer l’expression de mes sentiments respectueux.

Nom [directeur d’école]
Appendix E
Informed Consent Letter for Parents (English)

Date

Dear teacher,

Please find enclosed an invitation letter to participate in a research project about the involvement of immigrant Francophones of African origin in French-language schools. The purpose of the study is to investigate how Francophone parents of African origin are involved in their children’s formal education in the French-language elementary schools. Your participation is voluntary. The information you provide will be kept confidential and will only be used to better understand and appreciate the benefits of parental involvement in schools.

Django Keita, doctoral candidate in the Theory and Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT under the supervision of Professor Jim Ryan (OISE/UT, 250 Bloor Street West; phone: xxxxxx; xxxxxx, is conducting the research for the purposes of his PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. The research will involve the participation of eight parents, two community leaders, and four teachers.

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more about this study please contact directly the primary researcher. He can be reached through my office, by phone xxxxxx, email xxxxxx, or by mail:
Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Sincerely,

School principal [Name]
Appendix F

Informed Consent Letter for Parents

(French)

Date

Aux enseignantes et enseignants,

Veuillez trouver ci-joint une lettre d’invitation à participer à un projet de recherche sur l’implication des parents immigrants Francophones d’origine africaine dans les écoles de langue française. Le but de cette recherche est d’examiner comment les parents francophones d’origine africaine sont impliqués dans l’éducation de leurs enfants.

La recherche sera effectuée par Django Keita, étudiant en doctorat au Département de la théorie et des politiques en éducation, IEPO-UT. Elle sera sous la supervision du professeur Jim Ryan. La recherche sera menée dans le seul but de compléter une thèse de doctorat et éventuellement pour des articles de recherche. Elle impliquera la participation de huit parents, deux leaders de la communauté, and quatre enseignantes et enseignants. Votre participation à cette recherche est volontaire. Les informations que vous fournirez seront gardées de façon confidentielle et seront utilisées pour mieux comprendre les avantages liés à l’implication des parents à l’école.

Si vous êtes intéressés à prendre part à cette recherche ou si vous désirez en savoir plus, je vous invite à contacter directement le chercheur principal. Il peut être joint en passant par mon bureau, en téléphonant au xxxxxxx, par courriel xxxxxxx ou en lui écrivant à l’adresse ci-dessous :

Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Veuillez agréer l’expression de mes sentiments respectueux.

Nom [direction d’école]
Appendix G
Informed Consent Letter for Teachers
(English)

Date

Dear teacher,

Please find enclosed an invitation letter to participate in a research project about the involvement of immigrant Francophones of African origin in French-language schools. The purpose of the study is to investigate how Francophone parents of African origin are involved in their children’s formal education in the French-language elementary schools. Your participation is voluntary. The information you provide will be kept confidential and will only be used to better understand and appreciate the benefits of parental involvement in schools.

Django Keita, doctoral candidate in the Theory and Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT under the supervision of Professor Jim Ryan (OISE/UT, 250 Bloor Street West; phone: xxxxxx, is conducting the research for the purposes of his PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. The research will involve the participation of eight parents, two community leaders, and four teachers.

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more about this study please contact directly the primary researcher. He can be reached through my office, by phone xxxxxx, email xxxxxx, or by mail:
Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Sincerely,

School principal [Name]
Appendix H

Informed Consent Letter for Teachers

(French)

Date

Aux enseignantes et enseignants,

Veuillez trouver ci-joint une lettre d’invitation à participer à un projet de recherche sur l’implication des parents immigrants Francophones d’origine africaine dans les écoles de langue française. Le but de cette recherche est d’examiner comment les parents francophones d’origine africaine sont impliqués dans l’éducation de leurs enfants.

La recherche sera effectuée par Django Keita, étudiant en doctorat au Département de la théorie et des politiques en éducation, IEPO-UT. Elle sera sous la supervision du professeur Jim Ryan. La recherche sera menée dans le seul but de compléter une thèse de doctorat et éventuellement pour des articles de recherche. Elle impliquera la participation de huit parents, deux leaders de la communauté, and quatre enseignantes et enseignants. Votre participation à cette recherche est volontaire. Les informations que vous fournirez seront gardées de façon confidentielle et seront utilisées pour mieux comprendre les avantages liés à l’implication des parents à l’école.

Si vous êtes intéressés à prendre part à cette recherche ou si vous désirez en savoir plus, je vous invite à contacter directement le chercheur principal. Il peut être joint en passant par mon bureau, en téléphonant au xxxxxx, par courriel xxxxxx ou en lui écrivant à l’adresse ci-dessous :
Django Keita
PhD Candidate
Theory and Policy Studies in Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
250 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6

Veuillez agréer l’expression de mes sentiments respectueux.

Nom [direction d’école]
Appendix I
Telephone Script for Community Agencies
(English)

“May I please speak with ____________ [Name of the president/member of the community association]? Good morning / afternoon. My name is Django Keita. I am a doctoral candidate at OISE/UT and am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Jim Ryan towards my thesis. I would like to know if you could recommend me the name of a community leader to participate in my research.

My general research question is how do Francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in school? What strategies do these parents employ in their involvement in their children’s formal education? What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of their involvement in school? What inhibits or facilitates their participation in their children’s education?

“My intention is to come to meet with the community leader at a convenient time for the community leader and spend about forty five minutes to one hour in conversation with him. Interviews will be taped at his agreement and he will have an opportunity to meet with me a second time for further clarifications. Would you be able to recommend me a community leader? … [Answer any questions]. Thank you very much and I look forward to meeting with him then.
Appendix J
Telephone Script for Community Leaders
(English)

Good morning / afternoon. My name is Django Keita. I am a doctoral candidate at OISE/UT and am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Jim Ryan towards my thesis. Your name was referred to me by [NAME] and I would like to know if you could participate in my research as a community leader.

My general research question is how do Francophone parents of African origin understand parental involvement in school? What strategies do these parents employ in their involvement in their children’s formal education? What is the nature (i.e., extent, depth) of their involvement in school? What inhibits or facilitates their participation in their children’s education?

Your participation will be voluntary; you may withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any question at any time. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness in your field of work. Finally, you will be free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

“My intention is to come to meet with you, as a community leader, at a convenient time for you and spend about forty five minutes to one hour in conversation with you. Interviews will be taped at your agreement and you will have an opportunity to meet with me a second time for further clarifications. Would you be participating in this study? … [Answer any questions]. Thank you very much and I look forward to meeting with you.
Appendix K

Questions for Parents

- Interviews will be semi-structured, open-ended to ensure that the respondents’ experiences with the French-language schools are fully captured.
- The same protocol will be used for each participant in order to facilitate the comparison of responses. However, conversation will be permitted to diverge when appropriate from the protocol.
- Interviewees will be provided well ahead with a letter of consent outlining my key focus areas during the interviews.
- Interviews will be tape-recorded for transcription later.
- I will also take note during the interviews. These notes and the tapes will be transcribed later.

Introductory questions will include participant’s country of origin and years in Canada.

1. Please tell me a little bit about parental involvement in school. What does it mean to you as a parent?

2. How are you involved in your child/children’s formal education, and why did you choose this type of involvement strategy?

3. What is the nature (i.e. extent/depth) of your involvement in the activity/activities you have chosen to participate in?

4. What challenges/inhibitors do you have in the exercise of your support to your child/children’s schooling?

5. How do you negotiate your double minority status within the Franco-Ontarian society, in general, and your experiences in dealing with the schooling of your children in particular?
5. Does your racial identity constitute an impediment in your relationship with your child/children’s school? If yes, could you provide me with a few specific examples?

Votre identité raciale est-elle une encombre dans votre relation avec l’école de votre/vos enfants? Si oui, pourriez-vous me donner des exemples concrets?

6. What experiences (if any) do you have in terms of involvement in school before and after immigrating, and how these experiences played in your decision to participate (or not to participate) in your child’s schooling?

Quelles sont vos expériences (s’il y en a) en matière d’implication dans l’école de vos enfants avant et après votre immigration? Et comment ces expériences ont-elles joué dans votre décision de vous impliquer dans l’éducation de votre enfant?

7. What do you think of government and schools’ policies in terms of encouraging or deterring minoritized immigrant parents from involvement in school? How can that be changed?

Que pensez-vous des politiques scolaires ainsi que celles du gouvernementales pour encourager/encombrer les parents d’origine immigrante à participer à la vie de l’école? Comment pourrait-on changer cela?

8. Do you think that there are preferential treatments when it comes to parental involvement in schooling? If so, can you tell me about specific instances of such a treatment?

Pensez-vous qu’il existe des traitements préférentiels en ce qui concerne la participation des parents à l’école? Si oui, y a-t-il des exemples précis que vous pouvez me donner?

9. In you views, what specific strategies do you believe can help minoritized parents to become more involved in their children’s schooling?

Selon vous, quelles sont les stratégies spécifiques qui pourraient aider les parents minoritaires à prendre une part plus active dans l’éducation de leurs enfants?
Appendix L
Questions for Teachers

• Interviews will be semi-structured, open-ended to ensure that the respondents’ experiences with the French-language schools are fully captured.
• The same protocol will be used for each participant in order to facilitate the comparison of responses. However, conversation will be permitted to diverge when appropriate from the protocol.
• Interviewees will be provided well ahead with a letter of consent outlining my key focus areas during the interviews.
• Interviews will be tape-recorded for transcription later.
• I will also take note during the interviews. These notes and the tapes will be transcribed later.

1. Please tell me a little bit about your teaching experience, your students, and your vision of an inclusive school system.

2. What does the involvement in school (or the lack of it) of minoritized parents mean to you?

3. Can you give examples of how the involvement of parents contributes to your daily work?

4. Do you think that minoritized parents are involved in their children’s schooling? If yes, what activities they participate in mostly and why is it that they choose those activities? If not, what barriers hinder their involvement, and what have you done to support/encourage it?

5. What do you do to help encourage or support parental involvement of Francophones of African origin? What resources do you have?

6. Do you think that there is a racial differential treatment in regards to parental involvement? If yes, how?

Veuillez me parler de vos expériences dans l’enseignement, de vos élèves, ainsi que de votre vision d’un système d’éducation inclusif.

Que signifie pour vous participation/non participation des parents minoritaires à l’école?

Pourriez-vous m’indiquer par des exemples comment l’implication des parents contribue à votre travail de tous les jours?

Pensez-vous que les parents minoritaires participent à l’école de leur enfant? Si oui, dans quelles activités et pourquoi choisissent-ils ces activités? Si non, quels sont les obstacles à leur implication, et qu’avez-vous fait pour l’encourager?

Que faites vous pour encourager les parents francophones d’origine africaine à s’impliquer dans l’éducation de leurs enfants? Quelles sont les ressources que vous disposez?

Pensez-vous qu’il y a des traitements préférentiels basés sur la race quant à la participation des parents à l’école? Si oui, comment?
7. From your teaching experience, what kind of elements can facilitate involvement of minoritized parents such Black Francophones in their children’s formal education?

Selon votre expérience dans l'enseignement, quels sont les éléments de nature à faciliter la participation des parents d'origine minoritaires tels que les francophones noirs?
Appendix M
Questions for Community Leaders

- Interviews will be semi-structured, open-ended to ensure that the respondents’ experiences with the French-language schools are fully captured.
- The same protocol will be used for each participant in order to facilitate the comparison of responses. However, conversation will be permitted to diverge when appropriate from the protocol.
- Interviewees will be provided well ahead with a letter of consent outlining my key focus areas during the interviews.
- Interviews will be tape-recorded for transcription later.
- I will also take note during the interviews. These notes and the tapes will be transcribed later.

As a Black Francophone community leader, what can you tell me regarding:

i) the French-language school system and parental involvement in school, and
ii) the role you play (or can play) to foster and facilitate family-school relationship?

En tant que leader dans la communauté, que pouvez-vous me dire en ce qui a trait i) à la participation des parents à l’école de langue française, et ii) le rôle que vous jouez (ou pourrez jouer) pour encourager et faciliter de bons rapports entre l’école et la famille?