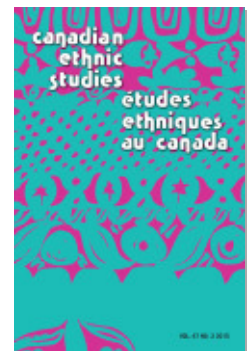Newcomer Civic Participation: The Alliance Homework Club and the Integration of Next Generation Youth in Ottawa

Nathalie Bélanger, Phyllis Dalley, Karine Turner

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Abstract

Through the analysis of ethnographic data collected in a homework club serving children of immigrant families, this article reports on a less documented mode of newcomer civic participation that is non-institutional and unrelated to government. Indeed, contrary to other clubs included in a larger study, the one discussed here is positioned by its organisers as outside the race for subsidies. Participation in this race entails that organisations such as theirs are accountable to and must frame objectives, which are amenable to those of funding agencies. We find that this parallel mode of participation is based on long-term objectives of immigrant community integration into the host community, most notably through the educational success of their children. Thus, the club presented here is at the intersection of two previously documented newcomer integration strategies: civic participation and investment in the next generation. This is the first study to document such a crossroads.

Résumé

Dans le cadre d'un plus vaste projet de recherche portant sur les clubs de devoirs en langue française dans la Ville d'Ottawa (Ontario, Canada), nous présentons ici une ethnographie menée dans un club sur une période d'un an. Ce club a été mis sur pied par un groupe de parents issus de l'immigration et renseigne sur un mode de participation sociale non institutionnel de nouveaux arrivants. Peu d'études documentent ce genre d'initiatives qui se déploient en périphérie des initiatives formelles et institutionnelles. Contrairement à plusieurs autres clubs et initiatives, les moniteurs et organisateurs de ce club ne sont pas à la recherche de financements des gouvernements et cherchent plutôt à travailler auprès des jeunes, sans avoir à s'insérer dans un mode de fonctionnement formel. Ce mode de participation permet à ces derniers de poursuivre l'objectif d'une meilleure intégration des membres de leur communauté dans la société d'accueil à travers la réussite scolaire des enfants. Le club de devoirs présenté se situe à l'intersection de deux stratégies déployées par les nouveaux arrivants : participation sociale et investissement dans la deuxième génération. Il s'agit ici d'une des premières études à documenter ce type de processus.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we investigate newcomer civic participation through the study of ethnographic data gathered at a homework club, founded by a Francophone ethno-

specific parents' association, which we will refer to as 'the Alliance'[1]. The organisers position themselves outside the subsidy race – be it at the school, municipal, provincial or federal levels – which often finances newcomer integration projects or organisations in Canada. Indeed, in our study of 10 homework clubs in Ottawa (Ontario, Canada), this is the only one that refused to engage in this competition[2]. As such, the Alliance can be seen to typify a mode of civic participation, which Andrew (2015) identifies as the least well-documented, that is non-institutional participation unrelated to government. More specifically, we are interested in understanding the role played by this homework club in terms of social participation and integration of newcomers to Canada. First, we present an overview of the literature pertaining to the subject of integration and assistance with homework. We shall see that, although many researchers have studied partnerships between schools and parents and have shown how tensions exist between them, fewer studies focus on immigrant parents' assistance with homework, especially in a linguistically minoritized context characterized by growing internal diversity. Second, we present our methodological approach followed by an overview of newcomer civic participation strategies as well as remarks concerning homework clubs. Third, we analyze the case of the Alliance homework club in terms of functioning, linguistic issues and desired outcomes of the club. We conclude with some remarks about the roles played by this club in terms of newcomer civic participation as it relates to the specific landscape of two official languages in Canada.

INTERSECTIONS OF INTEGRATION STRATEGIES: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The twentieth century has been characterized by massive specialist intervention in childhood and by the attempt to modify social behaviours to fit school norms (Hendrick 1994). In Western countries, mothers especially have been targeted in this wave of change. Mayall reports, for example, that health specialists and psychologists "have long aimed to modify mothers' behaviour" (2000, 244). Among them "educationalists are an increasingly influential set of professionals telling mothers what to do. Building on the well-established view that children's school achievements depend somewhat on 'parental involvement' […] educationalists have upped the stakes" (2000, 244). From the 1990s, a new social investment policy paradigm emerges in Canada and elsewhere in Western countries that puts emphasis on new forms of investment, especially in early childhood education and in children more generally as well as on labour market involvement of all adults. Because poverty interferes with children's cognitive development, the employment of both parents is considered as an investment in human capital and a way to break intergenerational cycles of poverty (Jenson 2013; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006). Indeed, collabora-

tion between parents, especially mothers who are now more active than ever before in the work force or looking for employment, and school tends to be a major feature of school systems in Western countries, although relationships between parents and schools are often rife with misunderstandings (Dubet 1997; Glasman 1996; Maubant and Leclerc 2008; Payet 1991; van Zanten 2001). It is therefore not surprising that a recently adopted Parent Involvement Policy for Ontario (Ministry of Education of Ontario 2010) states that although parent participation can take different forms, it should ultimately contribute to student success. As such, parents, and especially mothers, are expected to attend parenting courses, to cooperate with the school in order to help their children achieve high levels of performance in school evaluations, to supervise homework, and, as underlined by Mayall (2000), to encourage children to attend after-school centres at a younger age in order to facilitate the completion of homework. This resonates most strongly in urban contexts where parents do not always have enough time to assist their children with homework due to obligations in the work place. This can be particularly true for parents having immigrated to Canada who must work multiple shifts to make ends meet (Dalley 2009) and who may not be sufficiently proficient in their child's language of instruction to help with homework, as is the case of the parents of some of the children who frequent the Alliance's club.

Concurrently, Cosden, Morrison, Albanese and Macias, contend that a sharp increase can be noted in homework demands in recent years in the US, especially in schools attended by students from mid to high socioeconomic backgrounds. "[T]his has come in response to the perception that there is greater competition for college admissions, and that the students need to work harder to qualify for the college of their choice" (2001, 211). Furthermore, assistance with homework and access to after-school programs seems to be a way to ensure school success (Harper and Anglin 2010). For instance, where performance is at the highest in numerous disciplines in the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), especially in South Korea, Shanghai (China) and Japan, almost 75% of children receive shadow education, i.e., attend supplementary schools or receive private tutoring. As the cost of these services can be prohibitive for many families, however (Cosden et al. 2001), they contribute to the educational divide between those who can pay and those who cannot. Furthermore, this focus on homework tends to relieve the school of its responsibilities in the educational success of students: parents ultimately become solely responsible for their children's success (Prins and Willson-Toro 2008) and when children fail, parents are to blame. This issue is compounded for immigrant parents who do not speak the school language or experience difficulties communicating with the school as they might be seen as having a cultural deficit, to be unable to parent their child, or to lack interest in their child's education (Guo 2011, 2012).

From a different perspective and based on a meta-synthesis that explores relationships between two large constructs—parental involvement and academic achievement—Wilder (2014) shows that the strongest relationship is related to parental expectations for the academic achievement of their children, which can be defined as parents' beliefs and attitudes towards education and the future. Furthermore this positive relationship is noticed across school grades and across ethnic groups, although Wilder does not specify if some groups or individual parents have recently immigrated. The positive impact was found, however, to be stronger for certain ethnic groups than for others. This is an important finding overall as, according to the author referring to Jeynes (2005), "it confirms that parental involvement may significantly contribute to reducing the achievement gap between different ethnic groups" (Wilder 2014, 393). More surprisingly, as mentioned by the author, no positive relationship was found between parental assistance with homework and academic achievement when parents are the only ones in charge. On the contrary, this relationship was negatively correlated in some meta-analysis.

> One of the plausible explanations of these results is that most parents are not trained to teach certain concepts, regardless of their difficulty, or they may not be familiar with appropriate teaching methods. In either case, students are not likely to benefit much from this type of involvement. […] It is also likely that students who are struggling academically represent the majority of children requesting parental assistance in homework, which could explain negative trends between homework involvement and academic achievement (392).

Nevertheless, albeit parental involvement might take different forms and contribute to academic achievement, deficit models often continue to form the basis of programs aimed at helping parents help their children.

Crosnoe (2010) classifies programs for the disadvantaged found in the US according to their approach. First, there are direct approaches, which try to help parents make the home a better learning environment or organise literacy workshops that would help them to connect with schools. Second, the two-generation approaches use indirect methods. These are exemplified by the well-known Head Start (HS) program. The idea behind HS is that the best way to alter parenting behaviors which undermine school achievement is to improve the social and economic barriers under which they emerge. Although Crosnoe's analysis focuses on programs for the economically disadvantaged, we suggest that these same perspectives can be relevant in the case of some immigrant families. Indeed, the view that the home is the source of the educational achievement gap between immigrant and non-immigrant groups has also been shown to exist: the family is perceived to be the problem, and not the school. Hence, concomitantly to negotiating their migratory

journey, many immigrant parents must also navigate a new role in their child's schooling (Guo 2011). When they do not meet school expectations, they are targeted by programs aimed at increasing their involvement in their children's education. Yet, quoting Domina (2005), Prins and Willson-Toro (2008) affirm that neither specific parental activities nor parental involvement in schooling are predictors of a child's school trajectory.

Borrowing from Freire's critical pedagogy, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and Cummins' critical theory on bilingualism and biculturalism, Bernhard gives us another way of viewing the relationship between schools and marginalised communities. Indeed, contesting the view that these communities are without knowledge or culturally deficient, he speaks of their "funds of knowledge" or their "bodies of knowledge and know-how that are historically accumulated and circulated in marginalized communities and come to act as resources that are essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (2010, 324). As some schools act to disregard such funds of knowledge, they participate in the social processes, which produce the marginalisation of immigrant families and their children. Their knowledge about schooling and parental responsibilities are stripped of legitimacy; parents become disempowered in the education of their children. Such is the case for the parents in our study, situated in the context of French-language schooling in Ontario, Canada.

Speaking of minority French-language schools in Ontario, Farmer and Labrie (2008) show how immigration is an important feature of the changing student demographic. In this context, they wonder how relationships between the institution, immigrant parents, and the whole community are shaped. Based on an ethnographic study, and most particularly for the purpose of their article, on interviews with school principals, they analyse the complexity of processes at work in school/immigrant-family relations. In partnership with a women's community-based organisation focused on strengthening the relationships between immigrant parents and schools in order to promote integration, the authors also show the diversity of these processes from one school to another as well as the difficulty for immigrant parents to be fully recognized by school officials. Furthermore, Bélanger and Taleb (2006) and Taleb (2007) demonstrate that French-language school practitioners in Ontario often attribute children's school failure or difficulties to immigrant parental styles, which are sometimes believed to be dysfunctional, authoritarian or traditional. However, parental participation in school is requested, namely through the form of family-school partnerships.

Epstein (1995) has explored six types of family-school partnerships: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Although all of these forms of participation seem to be val-

orised, the first three appear to be most important for teachers. Vatz Laaroussi, Kanouté and Rachédi (2008) have studied the relationships between immigrant families and schools, pointing out their uniqueness and complexity. Based on fieldwork done in Québec (Montréal and Sherbrooke), they have developed six models that describe relationships between immigrant families and schools, and aim to foster school success for students (2008, 298-304): 1) in "assigned involvement" the school determines and assigns a specific role to parents. Viewing immigrant families as culturally foreign, the school takes charge of integration; 2) "collaborative partnership" considers, at least in theory, the school and the parents as equal partners. They share functions of socialization and instruction, although the role of the school tends to be more prominent: parents seem less visible in the school itself, but school officials believe that parents are equipped to participate in the children's education; 3) on the other hand, in the "collaboration with mediation space" model, equality between school and families is not in operation and the need for a third party to mediate, build bridges, and promote good communication is recognised. Community organisations, ethno-specific associations, family members or neighbourhoods could act as the third party; 4) equality between the school and the family is not assured in the "assumed distance collaboration" model, especially where a cultural and linguistic distance exists between parties; 5) following the "symbiotic cooperation" model necessitates that schools and families recognise each other's potential and work collaboratively. Through personalised interactions, schools enter the family's domain and accept that the family fulfills educational, socialisation and instructional needs of their children; finally, 6) "collaboration in search of visibility" incorporates the principles of "collaboration with space for mediation" (number three) and "assumed distanced collaboration" (number four). In this combined model, the school does not recognise community groups, be they ethnic, intercultural or religious, as school/home mediators offering support to families. These groups will indeed attempt to collaborate with schools in the areas of homework assistance and parental representation in the school, which also includes gaining information on school operations for parents, especially regarding the specific progression and pathways of their children. However, these attempts are often unsuccessful as the groups in question suffer from a lack of legitimacy within the school system. As such, the cooperation efforts remain unfinished. As in the case of the Alliance, the ability of ethno-specific or religious communities to support immigrant families linguistically and culturally as well as help them fulfill their educational and socialisation functions is accepted, but instruction is in the purview of the school only. The Alliance crosses this boundary: more than simply supporting families, as in model 4, our data suggests that the Alliance is a space in which parents can expect support and help for their children in the areas of instruction and formal curriculum.

Contrary to what is usually believed by some school practitioners or even taken for granted in some research protocols and literature, Guo also shows how active immigrant parents can be involved in the education of their children. This author tries to go beyond the cultural deficit model in defining what informal learning parents bring to support their children's schooling. She believes that parents' funds of knowledge:

> includes that drawn from their own educational backgrounds, their professional and personal experiences of interacting with schools in their countries of origin, their current understanding of the host country's education system, their own struggles as immigrant parents, and their future aspirations for their children (2011, 44).

Indeed, according to Vatz Laaroussi et al. (2008), some immigrant parents are willing to sacrifice their careers in order to invest in their children's future. Thus, the migration project appears to be structurally built around the dream of rapid mobility for their children, most importantly among those parents of low income. In fact, immigrant children from less-educated families perform better than their native born counterparts in educational attainment and their parents invest more in education than do well-educated immigrant parents.

> [U]nder the assumptions of imperfectly transferable foreign human capital, comparable wages for low educated immigrant and native born workers, and binding credit constraints among the low educated, immigrant children from low education backgrounds will outperform their native born counterparts in educational attainment, while their parents work more and invest less in their own human capital. Well educated immigrants, on the other hand, are likely to invest more in their own human capital than their native born counterparts, but will invest less in their children (Bonikowska 2007, 33).

Indeed, immigrant parents construct and mobilize their knowledge in different ways. Using an online questionnaire completed by thirty-eight participants from a coalition in Calgary, Guo identifies five aspects of informal learning that parents bring to their children: 1) learning school expectations by interacting with other parents, 2) self-teaching curricula by using the Internet, 3) passing on first-language knowledge by informal teaching, 4) instilling hybridity of two cultures by informal teaching, and 5) advocating and building their children's capacity to respond to challenging situations (2011, 46). More specifically, parents have contributed "to build[ing] their children's capacity for combating racism" (2011, 53) and some have learned how to navigate the doublespeak of the school system where "parental involvement is encouraged, but only forms of parental involvement that support existing school policies and instructional practices are actually welcome in schools" (2011, 53). Parents, for example, are responsible for helping with homework and

participating in fundraising activities but are less welcomed on the uncontested "terrain of schooling" and curriculum (2011, 53).

Our research suggests a need for further study of such participation. Indeed, our ethnography shows how parents construct a context in which children from their own immigrant community are more likely to positively move forward and thrive in schools. As such, we believe this homework club typifies non-institutional participation unrelated to government, as described by Andrew (2015). Contrary to what Guo portrays in terms of informal learning, the club we examine locates itself in continuation with school activities, initiating after-school work closely related to what is being done during the school day. We will see how important it is for parents, especially for those in charge of the club, to contemplate the futures of their community's children. Passing on cultural and linguistic values appears to be complicated in the case we present because of the club's principal organiser's paradoxical standpoint about this transmission. Our ethnography appears particularly relevant in the context of the growing implementation of newcomer programs, especially in North America but also elsewhere: According to Short (2002) there is a need to better understand these programs which are, at the present time, under-examined. Before delving deeper into the interworkings of the Alliance, let us present our methods of inquiry.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Taking an ethnographic approach that seeks to understand a scene of action, our data base consists of field notes written following observations done at the Alliance homework club as well as interviews, either formal or informal, with instructors or monitors, school administrators, organisers and student participants. Two members of our project, a co-researcher and a research assistant, visited the homework club once or twice a week over a period of one year. However, the difficulty of negotiating our entry into the field should be noted. Even after some discussion with the principal organiser of the club, he still seemed reluctant to open the club's doors to us, recalling the fact that the community benefiting from the homework assistance was already minoritized in our society, of which we can be constructed as representatives. Thus, the organiser might have first perceived our presence as a potential threat to his community, regardless of our explanation that our intention was not to evaluate the club, but to understand it. Our first visits were postponed to a later date for various reasons (NO.KT. 2011.02.03)[3] and direct access to the parents of young people registered at the club was denied to us by the organiser who maintained that "it was not the way their club functions" and "that he should first speak to the parents in their language of origin" (NO.KT. 2011.05.19). Once we were finally wel-

comed and entered the club, always under the supervision of a monitor who met us in the hall, it was obvious that the organiser wanted to showcase the positive aspects of their initiative, which had begun over five years before the start of our study. During our first visit, the club organiser formally presented us to the students and other monitors, saying that we were there "to see how well they worked." We had the chance to talk informally, without recording, with some young people who attended the club often. We also analysed documentation taken from the club's and parents' association presence on the internet. We followed a conventional method of data saturation, that is to say, the *in situ* observation ended when the rituals and denoted processes had a certain degree of repetition or consistency. The end of our field research corresponded with the end of the school year and the arrival of early summer. The researchers who spent time in the field analysed the data using thematic analysis, in consultation with the larger researcher team. We followed an ethnographic approach that works towards generalization from grass 'data' (Cefaï 2010, 2012). We took notes on the fly, recopying and organizing them the following days, paying particular attention to the words being said and the interactions taking place, in a way that is 'aligned as much as possible with the perspectives of the participants' (Cefaï 2012, 40, our translation). Themes were identified within the teams' field journals as well as interviews conducted with club monitors, students and parents.

NEWCOMER CIVIC PARTICIPATION: GETTING INVOLVED OUTSIDE THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL STRUCTURE

Andrew (2015) exposes four modes of civic participation by newcomers in Canadian cities and, most particularly, as observed in the city of Ottawa. These four modes of participation are: 1) institutional participation within government, 2) institutional participation in partnership with government, 3) non-institutional participation aimed at influencing government and 4) non-institutional participation unrelated to government. These modes of participation are used by newcomers to negotiate their place in their new environments. Through our research, we have come to understand that the homework club's chosen mode of participation corresponds to the fourth mode: non-institutional civic participation unrelated to government. According to Andrew, it is also that mode of non-political participation about which there exists the least empirical evidence.

The Alliance's initiatives, which include the creation of homework clubs across one Ontarian city, fall indeed into what Andrew defines as a mode of self-organisation initiated by newcomers: "groups that come together to organize activities for the benefit of their membership and, for some, to create links more broadly to areas of civil society" (2015, 280). According to Andrew, "there are a huge number of such

groups, some of which are ethno-specific in their composition and some of which have a more mixed composition" (2015, 280). Not only is the Alliance ethno-specific, the homework club is also specifically family based. As we shall demonstrate, the Alliance has chosen a mode of civic participation based on self-organization because its organisers felt that partnerships with different tiers of government, in order to obtain grants, for example, did not serve their purpose, which is to positively influence their youth's educational trajectories.

Observations allowed us to see how parents, through participating in the homework club, invest in their children's educational outcomes and futures. Parents from this community face difficulties with integration, expulsion of their children from school, racism and school failure. The club appears to be an intermediary space through which parents can participate in their children's schooling, especially for those who did not previously know how to get involved and help their children with homework. Guo (2012) and Vatz Laaroussi et al. (2008) have documented innovative ways parents find of fitting in and ensuring that their children are adequately equipped to succeed in school. The Alliance's initiative is one such parent-led strategy. Before we turn our attention to three components of our analysis—1) inner-workings of the club, 2) linguistic issues and 3) desired outcomes of the club, as they relate to Andrew's modes of civic participation—let us briefly describe what is understood by the notion of homework club.

HOMEWORK CLUBS

Homework clubs provide homework supervision or assistance outside school time for children and youth. Whereas some clubs are organised within public libraries (Train, Dalton and Elkin 2000; Bevin and Goulding 1999), others take place in schools, or in community centres. Organised on the basis of registration or as walk-in centres, they may include play and leisure time or mirror the school day. The latter forms of these clubs are more strictly aligned to school curriculum and test preparation. In some clubs, children are invited to help each other whereas in others, they are under closer supervision and control of monitors. Oftentimes, monitors are retired or in-service teachers, students from higher levels, or parents involved in volunteer work in the community. Some homework clubs are organised around a sole discipline, for example mathematics (Hill 2008) while others are multidisciplinary.

It is important to note that schools and homework clubs do not always have the same goals. As such, tensions can arise, relating to a misunderstanding of each other's purpose. This can result in both these actors not taking advantage of the range of resources and support available (Hill 2008). Indeed, Hill (2008) exposes the competing agendas between school administrators, parents and youth where after-

school homework programs are concerned. School administrators often put pressure on clubs to bridge the achievement gap and to conform to the school agenda. Similarly, parents, particularly those less familiar with the school system, want homework clubs to provide academic help. Yet, youth say they attend this kind of after-school program to socialise with friends. Furthermore, whereas some parents might perceive that the clubs are taking them out of the homework loop and reducing their opportunities to communicate with the school about their child, others feel relieved of the stress and time-consuming nature of homework help. In addition, Hill (2008) found some clubs readily invite parents in, by providing them with a specific role within the club. Moreover, these types of clubs can also provide strategies for parents regarding the supervision of their child's homework (Hill 2008).

For some parents, homework clubs are seen as a space where students receive much needed assistance. Seeing other children or youth studying can also be considered a motivator, in encouraging students to aim for school success. However, others are more cautious as to the benefits of participating in a homework club. Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez and Brown have produced a table (2004, 225) showing the pros and cons of after-school programs or activities. These authors argue that participation in too many extracurricular activities might detract from academic work. Moreover, homework clubs may prevent participation in other types of activities that could benefit students, in the way of bonding with their peers and community and enjoying free time and release (see also Maradan 2009). It is also crucial to be aware of which students access homework assistance. In this line of thought, Van Brederode (2009) wonders if students who are in need of assistance are the ones registered in after-school programs, while Périer (2009) highlights the gap between the children who benefit from school remediation and assistance and those who do not.

With this brief overview of homework clubs, our aim is to show the various forms homework clubs can take. The ethnographic fieldwork conducted for the purpose of this study has led us to better understand the Alliance's club, whose characteristics will be presented in the following section of this article.

OUTSIDE THE MARGINS: CREATION AND INNER WORKINGS OF THE ALLIANCE'S CLUB

Studies show that certain ethno-specific communities in Canada (Regroupement Ethnoculturel des Parents Francophones de l'Ontario 2003) struggle with social issues, such as poverty, school drop-out, juvenile criminality, absence of adequate support for women or lack of participation on the political scene. In an effort to address many of these issues and, for some, following the federal and provincial governments' propensity to support programs aimed at immigrants, leaders from Ontario's francophone

immigrant communities have created various organisations, each striving to improve the fate of their own, especially younger, community members.

The Alliance is one such organisation. Parents from one ethno-specific community from la Francophonie, especially those who were already active in varying school boards, came together to create the Alliance and joined hands in order to take hold of their children's future. The Alliance was created specifically in response to problems such as school drop out and low success rates of certain students from their community, and also, to mediate conflicts involving students and school personnel. In an attempt to address these situations, organisers came together and decided that the only way to take charge was to involve the community itself by creating a group of volunteers ready to work in collaboration with other parents, students and the school board. As we learned from an informal conversation with the Alliance's founder, their history has two phases: a first organisation was formed in response to specific school board actions but was then dismantled due to disagreements in regards to the funding of their activities. Following this disintegration, two separate associations, the Alliance and an association we call "the Group", were created (NO.KT. 31.03.2011).

The Group went on to become a prominent immigrant association in Ontario, opening its doors to members from a broader number of immigrant communities, and expanding the breadth and scope of its activities to include political action and government subsidies. Those who founded the Alliance chose rather to focus specifically on children and youth from their own community and to remain ethno-specific in their affiliation. This can be seen to relate as mentioned above with Andrew's non-institutional participation unrelated to government, since the Alliance remains ethno-specific in its composition, and focuses on activities which do not require government funding or intervention.

As indicated by Mr. Sedi[4], a prominent member of the Alliance and founder of the homework club, the Alliance members chose to create their own association mainly because they believed they could function best outside the subsidy race:

> M. Sedi explained to me that certain people who are now affiliated with the Group were investing their efforts in obtaining funding for the previously dismantled association. M. Sedi was among those who did not believe in that 'method of governance.' He was already doing some volunteer work within homework clubs and did not stand behind those who wished to get involved in the subsidy race[5] (NO.KT. 2011.03-31).

Thus, the Alliance became a separate entity, whose objectives are: 1) to promote the participation of parents in their child's education and 2) to prevent school dropout and juvenile delinquency. The homework club was put in place in accordance specifically with this second objective and through the deep involvement of Mr. Sedi.

During our first interview, Mr. Sedi mentioned that he had arrived in Canada in the late 1980s, after completing his studies in his country of origin, where he worked as a supply teacher. This work raised his interest in the education sector. Upon arriving, he realised that Canada's education system was very different from the one he had known, and consequently, that he must adapt. Even before his own children entered the Canadian school system, Mr. Sedi began networking within the community and made his interest in the experience of youth within the schools known. It is through his involvement in school councils that he met and recruited many of the instructors who now work at the homework club.

> I am known to one and all in the public school board as I have been a member, I have presided over parent's participation committees, I am the representative of ethnocultural communities in the committee of education and have been president of school councils in many different schools. Without those links, it would be very difficult. You have to know people, you must have networks (ENT. 2010.05.04).

Indeed, taking his cue from Anglophone individuals from his own country of origin, the Alliance's organisation is closely aligned to what was already being done by Mr. Sedi's English counterparts. It is also through these contacts that Mr. Sedi was able to access a classroom, free of charge, in the English language high school in which the English language homework club was being held. In our interview, Mr. Sedi states: "I called in my […] brothers in order to get the classroom at the high school" (ENT. 2010.05.04).

Also, for the first years, the club monitors volunteered their services. Then, through his community contacts, Mr. Sedi was able to set up a partnership with an organism that agreed to pay the salaries of some of the monitors. Indeed, having volunteered in an international language programme, Mr. Sedi came into contact with Mrs. Marleau, coordinator for a Ministry of Education-funded compensatory education program focused on reading, writing and maths. In hearing about the Alliance's homework initiative, Mrs. Marleau suggested that the compensatory program could get access to funding in order to start paying salaries for the monitors. Needless to say, Mr. Sedi was quite taken aback by this information, as he had never thought of pursuing funding for the club. However, he agreed to partner with the organism, as it would guarantee the sustainability of the homework club initiative, by ensuring an incentive for its monitors. Many times, Mr. Sedi reminded us that although they had gained access to funding, it was not part of their initial strategy and positioned the Alliance firmly outside the subsidy race:

> As you know, ethnocultural organisations are popping up like mushrooms and there is only one reason for these: finding grant money. Us, we try to be different. In general, the ethnocultural communities who receive grants are not present in the field and occupy a

large portion of their time filling out paper work and such. If you want to know these kids, you don't have to go chase after grants, it can be done another way. For example, you can ask the school boards or organisations to pay directly the person who is working. In a way, we are considered as employees of the homework clubs (ENT, 2010.05.04).

Thus, the club has been set up according to a set of values in line with what Mr. Sedi believes are the values shared by its community members. According to him, engaging in activities in order to obtain government subsidies or grants leads to a loss of focus on what is really important: the welfare of the children. It goes without saying that this stand or position creates tensions with community organisations that function with the aid of subsidies or government grants. Taking a look at the reasons motivating the clubs' creation, M. Sedi explains:

> I could see that the students, the children from the [our] community had many difficulties, in other words, they could not follow the rhythm of the other students, mainly the 'students of Franco-Ontarian origin' as we say. Even if those students have difficulties in regards to their second language, English, our children are faced with a double challenge regarding English and their mother tongue. In my country of origin, the schools took care of everything education related. The parents only had to feed, clothe and send their children to school. However, in Canada, we have learned that education is not only the school's responsibility but the parents also have their part to play. Once we came to realize that, we have put in place many organisations primarily to help our children, to accompany our children in their educational experience (ENT. 2010.05.04).

As exemplified in this excerpt and highlighted in the literature review, the challenges faced by many newcomer parents regarding their children's schooling can be daunting. Expectations relating to parental involvement sometimes differ greatly in the host country. More specifically, the language gap, between the parent's languages and the school's language of instruction, can create tensions and misunderstandings. As stated above by Guo (2011, 2012), Bélanger and Taleb (2006) and Taleb (2007), this can lead school personnel to perceive the parents as ill-prepared to accompany their child's education. This view that immigrant parents are not necessarily equipped to accompany their children with the homework help is typified in Mrs. Marleau's belief that: "If we look at some ethnocultural groups, the parents have not necessarily completed their education within our school system, and sometimes, they can have difficulty helping with their children's homework" (ENT. 2011.06.16). At the same time, Mrs. Marleau goes on to explain that parents in general are finding it difficult to help their children, as the teaching methods have evolved over time. In other words, she emphasizes the fact that immigrant parents are not the only ones who are struggling. Mrs. Marleau's first statement is corroborated by the remarks made by Vatz Laaroussi, Kanouté and Rachédi (2008) in that many immigrant parents' school

experiences are quite different from those of their children in the host country. Harper and Anglin's (2010) contention that homework help has become a way to ensure school success for parents who feel overwhelmed by the task also falls in line with Mrs. Marleau's second statement.

Thus, the Alliance club supports many parents, as homework help is not something that was expected of them in their countries of origin. Mr. Sedi adds: "Not all parents are aware that their child has homework every night. It's a shame, but that's the case" (ENT. 2010.05.04). It is interesting to note how well Mr. Sedi has integrated the norms surrounding the role played by parents in regards to homework in Canada. As he mentions, in regards to himself and other immigrant parents:

> We later came to understand that the tasks were divided in two; there are some tasks that were the school's responsibility and others that were to be taken care of by the parents. We woke up a little late, but, that's why we have set up many organisations, especially to help our children, to support our children in their schooling (Ent, 2010.05.04).

In light of the challenges faced by many parents from its community base and in order to help students in the most effective way, the Alliance offers a 4-day a week homework help program in two different locations, sometimes attracting students living many kilometers away from the club's locations. Whereas many clubs take place immediately after school, the Alliance's club doesn't: "For them, it works better in the evening", as related by Mrs. Marleau (ENT. 2011.06.16). Indeed, the club is held from 6 pm to 8 pm and is free of charge to families. Although it is open to all students, it mainly attracts students from Mr. Sedi's own community. The homework club monitors are primarily adults with a postsecondary education, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral studies. A clear separation seems to be at work between those identified as having more scientific and more literary expertise (ENT. 2011.05.16) as one monitor may help solely with mathematics homework and another concentrates on language arts. Just as monitor recruitment happens through personal contact, the recruitment of students happens primarily by word of mouth. Also, Mr. Abadi, one of the monitors, mentions that at the beginning of each school year, two monitors go around to the student's homes and get the parents to sign a participant form (ENT. 2011.05.16). The adults therefore know where the students live, which contributes to the familial feeling and bonding within the club. It would also explain why the children and youth at the homework club are all mainly from the same community. Moreover, year after year, many of the students return and come with their siblings while some of the monitors bring their own children to the club, thus adding to this particular feeling of a family-based initiative (NO.NB. 2011.02.03).

Although we have thus far presented this "family" as belonging to an ethno-specific community in Ontario, it is also important to consider their positioning

within that particular population known as Ontario's francophonie. Indeed, students who participate in the Alliance's homework club initiative all attend French-language schools. As such, linguistic issues are often foregrounded in the club.

LINGUISTIC ISSUES: HOMEWORK CLUBS IN A MINORITY SETTING

French language students in Ontario already represent a linguistic minority within their province, English being the majority language. Indeed, Francophones represent less than 5% of the total population of Ontario. Using the Ontario government's 2011 inclusive definition of a Francophone, it is estimated that 611,500 Ontarians are Francophone. That is, they either: 1) have French as their first language or 2) have knowledge of French as an official language and use French at home, although neither French nor English is their mother tongue. This latter group includes many immigrants to Ontario from Africa (Office of the French Language Services Commissioner 2013). Given the aforementioned minority status of Francophones, these newcomers can be seen to form a minority within a minority. At the same time, they form a numerical majority in many urban French language schools. This has led to the position, expressed below by Mr. Sedi, that the French-language school system in Ontario should be thankful to newcomers for making growth possible.

> As you know the, our community represents a majority within the student body of French schools, and thanks to their presence, the French schools have opened their doors, therefore those […] students are numerous in francophone schools (ENT. 2010.05.04).

Regardless of their numbers and the importance of their presence for the continued development of the French-language school system, Francophone ethnocultural groups continue to face challenges and issues comparable to those of newcomers integrating into the English majority group. Challenges for the Alliance's community are identified as: 1) learning English, 2) maintaining competency in the language of their country of origin and 3) improving school success. The Alliance intends to address the issue of school success within Ontario's French-language school system and, to a lesser extent, that of maintenance of the language of origin, which is neither French nor English. It is of importance to note that these objectives are pursued outside the French-language school, an institution seen as the cornerstone to the reproduction of Francophone Ontario.

Let us remember that the Alliance's club occupies space in an English language high school, in the same hallway as an English language homework club. Indeed, this space was obtained through Mr. Sedi's contacts with the English language club. Notwithstanding this linkage, the linguistic distinction between the clubs is maintained, as is shown in the following excerpt from field notes:

> A woman enters the French language club. I note that exchanges between adults tend to take place in their first language. I ask Mr. Sedi if this lady is a volunteer [...] He tells me that she belongs to the Anglophone club and that she was seeking an answer in French for her daughter […] Marking the difference between the Francophone and Anglophone clubs, he adds jokingly, 'She's from next door: Ontario; here we are in Québec' (NO.NB. 2011.04.14).

Hence, Mr. Sedi acknowledges the dynamic between minority and majority languages in Canada. Indeed, associating French with Québec and English with Ontario demonstrates an understanding of Canada's language policy as being based on a separation of French and English spaces. Yet, in keeping with its refusal to be associated with the politics of funding agencies, the Alliance situates itself outside the expected French/English divide by occupying space in English territory. Indeed, it would be easier for the Alliance to obtain funding if it functioned within French institutions and prioritised French-language maintenance as a central objective.

Although the Alliance works with students from French-language schools, maintenance of the French language is not prioritised in Mr. Sedi's discourse (although he repeats how important it is to function in French during the club time): those children who attend a French-language school will speak French and those who do not, will not. Rather, much like Canadian born Francophones in Ontario, Mr. Sedi's community must negotiate the tension between the value of the English language and that of the language brought from their country of origin. As the example below shows, however, the need to reproduce the home language seems to be a point of contention within the community itself.

> A little boy probably in grade 1, maybe even younger, comes in through the door and stands there watching. Mr. Sedi speaks to him in the language of his parent's home country. The boy does not react, does not even look up [...] Mr. Sedi tells me he's from the other club, the English one and adds: 'He doesn't even know his language'. I add: 'Is this because his parents don't speak with him in their language of origin?' Mr. Sedi replies: 'No, the TV is his parent!' (NO.NB. 2011.04.14).

Therefore, the Alliance positions itself outside the dominant discourse that separates the world into French and English and that makes French the language to be safeguarded against English. Pursuing funding opportunities as Francophones would necessitate the Alliance's realignment with dominant linguistic discourses and the creation of partnerships with French institutions. Indeed, since school success is understood as paramount to successful integration into Canadian society, and the French school system as having failed the children served by the Alliance, partnering with French institutions is a non-starter for the Alliance. Hence, the creation of a parallel space dedicated to school success as a rallying point for the Alliance members.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: DESIRED OUTCOMES OF THE HOMEWORK CLUB

As mentioned previously, the main objective of the homework club is the improvement of skills required for school success; each student progresses at his/her own pace and, according to the monitors, all who are committed to this goal will raise their grades. In an interview, Mr. Abadi, one of the instructors whose focus is on mathematics and science, explained the importance of increasing the students' self-esteem in regards to different school subjects.

> -Interviewer: You mentioned today that working on the student's confidence levels is something you look at.
> -Interviewee: When I see that the student has confidence in himself and is able to get by, I tell him to take charge and do his work individually. If he has problems he comes back to me. I spend more time with the weaker students because we do have some weaker students, but with mainly the 11th and 10th graders, I am able to build their confidence after about a month or two (ENT. 2011.05.16).

According to the monitors, many of the students go on to study at university, mainly in programs where French is the language of instruction. The instructors consider their work as an investment in the future, seeing university attendance by youth they have helped as a symbol of the club's success (NO.NB. 2011.04.14). Indeed, the club acts as a potential site where individual and collective projects are made possible in a context where the school does not fulfill its promises for everyone. In fact, Mr. Abadi mentions his role in orienting and counselling youth interested, for instance, in math or chemistry, and sometimes, in his opinion, wrongly channelled by the school into the collegial stream instead of the university stream, in other words, to technical community colleges instead of universities (ENT. 2011.05.16). Since the monitors themselves are university graduates from their country of origin, unsurprisingly, they consider favourably the university stream for the youth under their supervision in the club. This is not the only difference noted between the school's vision and the club's vision of the needs of their community's children.

Indeed, the instructors are committed to helping every child improve, including those who they perceive as having difficulties, and seek out the school's help in this regard. They have come to realize, however, that they hold a different definition of "difficulty" compared to that of the school board's. Mr. Sedi mentions:

> Because this term at the school board, as new parents we, we used these words, but a child in difficulty is a child who does not keep up with the pace, who has a learning difficulty. I have just found this out [laughs], but before, we said to the school board that we wanted to help students who have difficulties and every time, they told us there were specialists for this (ENT. 2010.05.04).

This latter excerpt shows how meanings can differ from one individual to another. It recalls the misunderstandings pointed out by Bernhard when she mentions that working with immigrant parents has brought plenty of examples of encounters with obstacles, assumptions, or ignorance. As an example, the communications "from school to parents including report cards are often incomprehensible despite any translations that might be provided. As well, they tend to disempower the recipient utterly (e.g., 'we consider it in the best interest of your child to enroll him in a special needs program'). The parents may see a prize when in fact it is a sentence to academic failure" (2010, 321).

The Alliance's commitment to social inclusion is exemplified by the importance accorded the children's future. One of the best illustrations of this is the decision to recruit one of the older students from the homework club to become an instructor at the club. As he heads off to university, he is being trained to work as a replacement instructor for the older instructor, who will eventually take a step back in his involvement with the club. There is a sense of continuity and giving back, as the student in question explains to us that he has greatly benefited from his participation in the homework club and enjoys helping others. Talking about his fellow classmates, this student says "it's something I like to do because I want them to succeed" (ENT. 2011.05.27).

CONCLUSION

Based on an ethnography carried out over the course of one year, this article aimed at exploring the following question: What is the role played by an ethno-specific homework club in terms of social participation and integration of newcomers to Canada? We chose to draw upon Andrew's four modes of civic participation by newcomers in Canadian cities to better understand the Alliance's chosen mode. Based on our observations as well as our interviews with monitors and youth, we suggest that the workings of this club fall into what Andrew (2015) defines as a mode of self-organisation initiated by newcomers who aim to influence themselves and create links with civil society more generally without government support. As Andrew underscores for another site (2010), the Alliance does not consider crossing borders, influencing and transforming the society at large or engaging in political participation. Nor does it attempt to combine its efforts with other associations or organisations with a more mixed composition. Rather, the club represents a group of people, especially men, who come together to organise activities for the benefit of their own community and, especially, for the benefit of their young members. It is by way of this civic participation that they contemplate a more successful integration in Canada for the whole of the community. Our study of the Alliance's club allows us

to further our understanding of how immigrant parents can initiate processes that contribute to their children's school success from beyond the margins of the school, and outside the divide between official language communities in Canada.

In retrospect, we succeeded in entering a rare terrain, i.e., a Francophone ethno-specific and family-based homework club which tends to protect its members viewed by organisers as fragile or vulnerable within society. Although we were in close proximity to some of the parents, we were not able to interview any of them, as Mr. Sedi wished to protect them from any 'intrusion' into what he considers to be a different way of functioning in society. It is worthy to note that most of the parents who dropped off their children at the club were women, while the monitors were all men. This aspect can be seen to contrast with what we previously stated, in terms of the important investment of women from the West, in the field of education.

We believe that the monitors and the parents who enrolled their children in the club were mainly those parents greatly involved and hopeful for their children. Our literature review shows how challenging it can be for immigrant parents to decrypt and understand the functioning of school systems. In this way, the club occupies an intermediate space between home and school where, as mentioned by Vatz Laaroussi et al. (2008), parents can participate in their children's schooling, especially those who did not previously know how to get involved and help with their children's homework. As Wilder (2014) mentions, if there is no positive relationship found between parental assistance with homework and academic achievement when parents are the only ones in charge, it appears however that in terms of parental expectations for academic achievement for their children, namely parents' beliefs and attitudes towards education and the future, school is paramount to success across grades and ethnic groups. The homework club occupies a space in which meeting such positive expectations are made possible. Although there are still some challenges to be faced, the Francophone ethno-specific community we came in contact with through the club has succeeded in creating a positive if very protective environment for their children and youth. We must now recognize the potential of homework clubs to increase the recognition of newcomers and minorities in being experts in the creation of organisations to help further their community's social integration, by way of their children's schooling into the larger society but also within the Francophone minority. The homework clubs therefore act as an intermediary for the social integration of an ethno-specific group working towards their social promotion in the hopes of a better future for their children.

NOTES

1.   In order to ensure the confidentiality of the Alliance's members, we do not reveal their specific country of origin, although the official name of the association does reveal its ethno-specificity. By using the term "ethno-specific" in relation to the immigrant parents who form the Alliance, our wish is not to convey essentialist views in regards to race and ethnicity. Indeed, we recognize that these categories are constructed through State/official discourses and social practices. Thus, we do not speak in terms of inherent group characteristics but rather of ascriptions and constructions resulting from social practices and interactions, most notably in the relation between the minority and the majority context.

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3.   In the following, 'NO' refers to observations notes, and 'ENT' to formal or informal interviews, along with the date of the observation or the interview.

4.   All names are pseudonyms in this article.

5.   For the purpose of this publication, excerpts from the data field have been translated from French to English.

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