



Support for New Immigrant Families

Challenges and Opportunities

Between January 2001 and May 2006, 1,110,000 people came to settle in Canada, as estimated by Statistics Canada in its report on the 2006 census. We can look at this number as a whole and say it represents 3.6% of the country's total population. Looked at from another point of view, it represents 1,110,000 individuals, adults and children, who are adapting to life in a new country. Family resource programs, with their unique approach to responding to their community, are well placed to assist newcomer families in the process of adaptation. The articles in this volume of *Perspectives* are aimed at practitioners, administrators, researchers and policymakers and focus on how we can make immigrants feel welcome. Readers are invited to reflect on ways to develop good practices when offering support to families who have arrived from many parts of the world to start a new life in Canada.

Recognizing that family resource programs face challenges in answering the needs of newcomer families, the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) undertook a project in February 2007 in partnership with the Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance. Called *Welcome Here*, the project was designed to strengthen links between settlement agencies and family resource centres in order to create more welcoming communities through increased participation of immigrant parents at community-based programs. We wish to thank Citizenship and Immigration Canada for its financial support of this project as part of its Welcoming Communities Initiative. This financial support has continued for a second phase of the *Welcome Here* project.

In Phase 2, the purpose has been to identify information and resources that would make family resource programs more effective in welcoming immigrant families. The current volume of *Perspectives* is just one part of this second phase.

We are very pleased to be able to present a wide variety of articles, beginning with a report by Marie Rhéaume on research done in community-based family support organizations in Quebec. A survey of members of the *Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille* (FQOCF – a provincial federation of family-oriented community organizations) showed that immigrants use these programs throughout the province, and not only in large centres. Five organizations were chosen to carry out interviews with practitioners and participants, including both immigrant mothers and mothers long established in Quebec. The practitioners who were interviewed emphasized the importance of maintaining an open, non-targeted and respectful approach—a key element of the guiding principles of family support. For their part, both groups of mothers confirmed that this atmosphere made them feel comfortable participating in activities there. The study found that these organizations play a significant role in opening communication between immigrants and long established families. Moreover, immigrant mothers said that this is where they learned about how Quebec society works and where to find resources in their neighbourhood. In the informal setting of the family resource program, mothers shared a common interest in their children's well-being and a common desire to break out of the isolation of being at home with children, allowing bridges to be built between the two communities.

Challenges remain, however, including the lack of adequate funding for community organizations to do the complex work of welcoming diverse populations.

Lianne Fisher’s article, “Taking an *Advocacy With Approach to Better Support Families*,” examines the *way* that help is given to immigrant families. She draws a distinction between *advocacy with* and *advocacy for*, pointing out that the assumptions practitioners make can sometimes lead to stigmatizing and marginalizing the very people they hope to support. Taking an *advocacy with* approach requires practitioners to recognize how some of their assumptions about newcomer families have been socially constructed. Fisher takes as an example notions practitioners may have about children in the role of “cultural broker,” mediating exchanges between their parents and Canadian society. She concludes that practitioners need to critically reflect on their underlying beliefs about immigrating families in order to improve their practice and truly assist families to reach their goals.

As part of Phase 2 of FRP Canada’s *Welcome Here* project, project coordinators organized focus groups to find out what immigrant families themselves would like to see in a “welcoming community.” At the same time, they asked practitioners about current practices in the area of service to immigrant families, as well as about the resources and training they would need to improve their work. Extracts from the report of these Phase 2 activities, “More Lessons Learned,” are included in this volume of *Perspectives*. It is interesting to note that practitioners and families agree on the elements that make a community welcoming: access to information, training and support services, translation services, mentorship programs, and a physical environment that celebrates cultural diversity. In the face of many challenges, family resource programs continue to build upon the strengths of their participants and create welcoming spaces where families have the opportunity to provide mutual support to one another and to actively participate in community life.

In the *Welcome Here* project focus groups mentioned above, both newcomer families and family support practitioners put high on their wish list “greater access to documents and other resources in many languages.” Unfortunately, taking ideas in one language and converting them to another is not a straightforward process, as Betsy Mann explains in her article, “Reflecting on Issues of Translation and Interpretation.” She enumerates some of the barriers to accurate and effective translation of written text, including availability of professional translators, understanding of cultural and con-

textual nuances, and fidelity to the original in both tone and meaning. Interpretation, which refers to oral communication, introduces other complexities which may get in the way of clear understanding between speakers of different languages. Mann suggests a number of ways to minimize the possibility of misunderstanding, but her main purpose is to raise awareness in practitioners and administrators of the pitfalls lurking behind what might seem a simple procedure. As always, improving practice requires us to take a step back to consciously reflect on our current ways of doing things.

In her article “What are the Essential Elements of Valid Research? The Problem of ‘Data’ and their Collection in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” Judith Bernhard recounts how she was forced to step back and take another look at how she conducts research with immigrant populations. She describes two cases from her own research activities as professor in the School of Early Childhood Education at Ryerson University. In the first case, she was confronted with the tension between her academic training and her perspective as a representative of Latina culture. She suggests that researchers need to be more mindful of their own professional training and acculturation when they do research. In the second case, she explains how her data collection about the experience of Somali refugee mothers was severely compromised. There were irreconcilable differences between, on the one hand, the cultural norms and perceptions of the population under study and, on the other, the ethical and professional requirements of credible academic research. Bernhard has no easy answers for this conundrum, but raises the issue of “data” and their collection in diverse cultural settings for the research community to consider. Her purpose is not purely theoretical. As she points out, if researchers cannot present the results of their investigation in a way that makes it acceptable “evidence,” the point of view of the immigrant community will not be reflected in policies and practice.

It is clear that the issues involved in serving newcomers require everyone working in the field of family support to be aware of both the opportunities and the challenges that may arise. We hope that the articles in this volume will spark discussion and move us toward ways of working that will respond to the complex and varied needs of families who have come to settle in Canada.

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