

## **Between welcome space and welcome culture: A systemic study** **Entre espace d'accueil et culture d'accueil : une étude systémique en contexte scolaire**

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Résumé de l'article

Ces dernières années, les inscriptions dans les classes d'accueil, un modèle de service destiné à soutenir l'apprentissage du français, ont considérablement augmenté au Québec. À travers une étude qualitative, nous analysons l'expérience de huit personnes enseignantes travaillant au sein du département des classes d'accueil d'une école du Grand Montréal. En nous appuyant sur un modèle systémique, nous avons examiné comment l'ouverture récente de nouvelles classes d'accueil, les relations entre les enseignants à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des classes, ainsi que la mécompréhension du programme par le personnel scolaire, ont engendré un fossé entre le département des classes d'accueil et les programmes réguliers. Nos résultats soulignent l'importance de promouvoir une culture accueillante au sein de l'école.



# BETWEEN WELCOME SPACE AND WELCOME CULTURE: A SYSTEMIC STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** Over the past decade in Quebec, enrollment has risen noticeably in “reception classes,” a program oriented toward teaching the French language. In this article, we study the experience of a department of second-language teachers from a systemic perspective. Eight high school teachers from the Greater Montreal area participated in this qualitative multiple-case study. Using a systemic model, we studied how the recent opening of new reception classes, the relationships between teachers from in and outside the classes, and the misunderstanding of the program by school staff created a gap between the reception department and the regular programs. Our results shed light on the importance of promoting a welcoming culture within the school.

## ENTRE ESPACE D'ACCUEIL ET CULTURE D'ACCUEIL : UNE ÉTUDE SYSTÉMIQUE EN CONTEXTE SCOLAIRE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Ces dernières années, les inscriptions dans les classes d'accueil, un modèle de service destiné à soutenir l'apprentissage du français, ont considérablement augmenté au Québec. À travers une étude qualitative, nous analysons l'expérience de huit personnes enseignantes travaillant au sein du département des classes d'accueil d'une école du Grand Montréal. En nous appuyant sur un modèle systémique, nous avons examiné comment l'ouverture récente de nouvelles classes d'accueil, les relations entre les enseignants à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des classes, ainsi que la mécompréhension du programme par le personnel scolaire, ont engendré un fossé entre le département des classes d'accueil et les programmes réguliers. Nos résultats soulignent l'importance de promouvoir une culture d'accueil au sein de l'école.

Several migratory movements have changed the general portrait of Quebec over the years. In the past decade, new arrivals to Quebec have been noticeable in increased enrollment in “reception classes” (Gentile, 2019). These classes, which are part of the province's support services for learning the French language (*Services d'accueil et de soutien à l'apprentissage du français*), are open to preschool, elementary, and high school children in Quebec who are not fluent in French (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2014). A threefold goal guides this program: “(1) to communicate in daily life; (2) to acquire the level of language proficiency necessary to carry out learning in the various school disciplines; and (3) to discover and understand the culture of their new environment” (MELS, 2014, p. 1). To support these objectives, these classes have a curriculum that is oriented toward learning French and normally leads to the students' integration into the regular curriculum (De Koninck & Armand, 2012a; De Koninck & Armand, 2012b).

The realities of these classes, as are their profiles, are influenced by international circumstances and related migration flows, as observed in many studies (Faas et al., 2018; Norberg, 2017; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). Depending on global situations, class portraits may change, even over the course of a year. One example is the arrival of Syrian refugees in Quebec during the 2015–2016 school year (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2019). The province welcomed 7,583 Syrian refugees that year (Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion, 2017), which prompted institutions to reorganize so as to provide support for the newly arrived students. One of the changes implemented was the creation of new reception classes. While intended to promote the integration of newly arrived students, some challenges remained in the school context when it came to providing students with optimal conditions for integration (Mamprin, 2021) – matters addressed later in this article.

The results presented here come from research whose main objective was to study the social support accompanying a collective activity designed to promote well-being among teachers (see Mamprin, 2021). The fruits of our analysis opened up an opportunity to explore another objective: to understand the issues experienced by teachers in reception classes through a systemic approach. A systemic approach allows us to envision the kind of context that should be created when a school welcomes newly arrived students without having a prior “reception culture.” Thus, we conducted an in-depth study of the bidirectional and dynamic relationships between the individual and their life context. We will revisit the details of the

systemic approach when we present the theoretical framework of the study.

#### **BACKGROUND: TEACHING NEWCOMERS**

The realities of the school system with which the newly arrived immigrant student is faced with are rather complex. For their part, the teacher is on the front line. First, those who are working with recently arrived students must deal with certain delicate psychosocial situations or learning and adjustment difficulties that may have resulted from harsh migratory experiences (Block et al., 2014; McNeely et al., 2017; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). Considering the pre-, peri-, and post-migratory contexts, students may also have experienced grief or trauma, which can impact their school life. Armand et al. (2013) identify several challenges in adapting to the Quebec school system for "undereducated" students (i.e., those who are more than 3 years behind the Quebec norm). The reasons are manifold (precarious living conditions, trauma, migratory shocks, family separations, different schooling modalities between the country of origin and the host country) and therefore the interventions carried out with these students who attend reception classes must also be manifold, taking into account emotional, affective, cognitive, and language dimensions (Armand et al., 2013). In short, in order to meet student needs, the teacher working in a reception class must be aware of the multiple realities a student has to deal with.

Second, teachers may feel helpless in certain situations (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018) – ones where their training in teaching French as a second language does not suffice. Students may be shaken or stressed by various obstacles – such as trauma, grief, or interrupted schooling – which may hinder their academic journey (MacNevin, 2012; McNeely et al., 2017). Teachers may experience more anxiety if they must support immigrant students in situations for which they are not trained (McNeely et al., 2017). Teachers also face further challenges, including disparities in the prior educational experiences of students and their families, which may influence the nature of teacher–family collaborations. Additionally, social pressures related to integration and language barriers may exacerbate the complexity of interactions between families, students, and teachers (Charette & Kalubi, 2016; Francis et al., 2017; Kanouté et al., 2016). According to Armand (2005), the social and scholastic integration of immigrant children should be the responsibility of all school staff members.

Third, differences are noticeable between schools concerning the integration of students from immigrant backgrounds. To have a better understanding of these differences, Mc Andrew et al. (2013) shed light on school factors such as social dynamics (e.g., the host context and the climate of interethnic relations within the school) and systemic factors (e.g., educational policies and programs). Information accessibility with regard to language acquisition and migratory background is of the utmost importance to teachers in order to meet the students' needs adequately. According to De Koninck and Armand (2012b), documenting the progress of students at various stages is essential for tracking the development of those from immigrant backgrounds in both reception and regular classes.

In light of these elements, a holistic and dynamic perspective is needed to study the factors that can influence the integration process in reception classes. Teachers are confronted with students' pre-, peri-, and post-migratory experiences, alongside the school and systemic factors that influence the integration process. Furthermore, in Quebec, particularly in the Greater Montreal area, a specific context has been generated, whereby some schools have had reception departments for several years, while others quickly established them to meet the demand (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). This creates a context in which both teachers and students may be new to the school environment. Moreover, reception classes are often located within schools that function as a point of service. As a result, some schools may be hosting these classes for the first time, which may require additional adjustments. Furthermore, it is important to note that students typically spend 2 years in reception classes, potentially making their time at the school where the reception classes are located transitional. After this period, they may be required to transfer to another school, where they integrate into the regular educational program.

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE SCHOOL CONTEXT FOR NEWLY ARRIVED STUDENTS**

Several authors have been interested in documenting the context surrounding the arrival of immigrant students from a systemic perspective. One example of a systemic approach comes from Norberg (2017) who, drawing on Anderson et al.'s (2004) post-migration ecology, emphasizes the entanglements and overlaps between the different systems that make up the environment: the teachers, the schools, the social movements, as well as the interaction among these elements. Gagné et al. (2018) and Papazian-Zohrabian et al. (2018), for their parts, have documented the school context for immigrant integration using systems theories, drawing

on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979; 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, there is little research focused on understanding the reception class from a systemic perspective, with teachers as the focal point. The complexity of working with newly arrived students can be magnified by the characteristics of the youth and a lack of training in school actors (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2020). We were interested to find out, from a systemic perspective, what is the experience of the teachers who work in a new reception class department?

#### **"PROCESS, PERSON, CONTEXT, TIME" (PPCT) MODEL**

According to Griffore and Phenice (2016), the classification of phenomena and their properties can be facilitated by adopting a systemic perspective. In this regard, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) PPCT developmental model – which focuses on the four components of process, person, context, and time – is particularly valuable due to its theoretical rigour and strong foundations. Three main phases can be identified in the development of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, culminating in the PPCT model. This latest iteration places particular emphasis on a dynamic component: the process (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). To consider a study to have been conducted according to the PPCT model, two theoretically independent propositions must be present:

##### **Proposition 1**

Especially in its early phases, but also throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)

##### **Proposition 2**

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)

Together, the four main components of the model (process, person, context, and time) can aid in the understanding of the relationships between the personal and contextual elements that influence the development of the individual. Considering that the primary objective of our research, from which these secondary results are derived, was to study the influence of social support (*process*) provided by colleagues (i.e., other teachers) during a collective activity (*context* and *time*) on teachers' psychological well-being (which refers to the component *person*; see Mamprin, 2021), we decided to ground our analysis in the PPCT model. Over the following sub-sections, we explore its components. The model is particularly relevant for addressing the research question posed in this article: What is the experience of teachers working in a new reception class department?

### **Process**

*Process*, or the “engine of development,” describes the dynamic two-way interactions between the developing individual and people, objects, and symbols (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 638). Indeed, while the processes are not directly addressed in the results, they are discernible in the regular two-way exchanges regarding relationships with students, regular teachers, and administrators.

### **Person**

The biopsychological characteristics of the individual are also central to the latest iterations of Bronfenbrenner's model (see Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This component brings together the biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics of the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In this article, we look at the environment from the perspective of the teacher, considering the teacher's background, previous experiences, and other personal characteristics. In addition, previous studies point to several attributes that may affect the experiences of teachers working with newly arrived students, such as prior experience working with such populations (Gagné et al., 2018), multilingualism, and higher intercultural competence (Haneda & Alexander, 2015). These personal characteristics would therefore interact with the characteristics of the context.

### **Context**

The environment in which the developing person evolves also influences and shapes the processes. Four interconnected and nested systems represent the *context* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998): the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The *microsystem* can

be defined as “a pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645). This contextual component encompasses relationships that the developing person has with others that are regular and occur over an extended period (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Some researchers highlight aspects of the relationship between teachers and families or newly arrived students. For instance, teachers working with newly arrived students tend to engage in advocacy behaviours to defend students’ rights, educate other school actors, and support families in their adaptation to the host culture (Haneda & Alexander, 2015).

When multiple microsystems of the individual are linked, it is referred to as a *mesosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). For instance, the relationship between two co-workers, the support given between school actors, and the relationships between students and their families could be included in this category (Théorêt, 2005). In a case where the individual is not directly involved in one of the systems (e.g., the relationship between a school administration and a ministry of education), such relationships are associated with the *exosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, the *macrosystem* includes the cultural, subcultural, or global social contexts that may influence other systems in the developing individual’s environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This latter system includes both the culture and the subculture in which the individual grew up as well as their current context. Thus, it may include social values about education and the responsibilities of the teacher (Théorêt, 2005).

### *Time*

Several temporal elements are also taken into consideration in the model proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998); two examples include the chronological age of the individual and the historical period. Particular attention is paid not only to stability but also to the continuities and discontinuities influencing the processes. There are two main spans of time to consider for our research: first, the number of years since the creation of the reception class department and, second, the period over which the data collection took place. We will return to this in the following section.

In summary, it is important to note that the context of our research created a unique microsystem, as the teachers came together during a collective activity aimed at promoting their well-being within the reception department of the participating school. Rather than focusing solely on this



context, we also drew on the shared experiences of the participating teachers to highlight complexities in the reception and integration of newly arrived students in Quebec schools. Specifically, from a systemic perspective, we aim to illustrate the teachers' perceptions of their work in reception classes.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research context***

This qualitative multiple-case study (Stake, 2006) took place within a high school reception department from January to June 2018. As previously mentioned, the displacement caused by the conflicts in Syria led to the opening of several reception classes during the 2015–2016 school year. This school, which is in the Greater Montreal area, was one of the institutions that opened its doors to these new students. Thus, the reception department had been active for less than two years at the time the data was collected.

Specifically, our research was conducted with teachers participating in a discussion group, a collective activity designed to promote their well-being. This collective activity, which was supported by the school administration, took place at the school during working hours. The purpose of a discussion group is to encourage free speech; it provides a space for individuals to express feelings, emotions, and thoughts where members are willing to listen with respect and without judgment (Bouville, 2005). It is also a space where individuals share at least one common concern (Raybaud-Macri, 2017). In the case of our research, participants' day-to-day experiences with students could constitute such a concern. Facilitated by a psychologist, the discussion groups were held once every 3 weeks. Eight 2-hour meetings were held from January to June 2018. In accordance with the psychodynamic principles of the discussion groups, the psychologist's interventions were carried out with authority and benevolent neutrality (Bouville, 2005; Robert, 2008). The topics of discussion were not suggested by an external party; they were addressed spontaneously by the participants. The rules also ensured an environment of confidentiality for the information shared in the discussions so that all participants could remain authentic (Bouville, 2005; Charlier, 2018).

### ***Data collection***

The main aim of the research was to study the social support implemented during collective activities intended to promote the well-being of teachers (see Mamprin, 2021). The secondary results presented in this article stem from systemic analysis of the data collected by two main data collection

methods: interviews and discussion group sessions. First, we led semi-structured interviews before and after teachers participated in the eight sessions of the discussion group (DG1–8). A first set of questions, posed in the first (I1) and second interviews (I2), and based on the theoretical proposal of Dagenais-Desmarais (2010), was oriented toward well-being at work. A second set, posed in I2, was oriented toward perceived social support, as described by Vaux (1990), and, more precisely, the impact the collective activity had on their support network and their subjective evaluation of the help they had perceived during the discussion groups. In addition, we also asked teachers a question about the perceived impact of this activity on their well-being.

Second, we performed an analysis of the eight 2-hour discussion group sessions, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to keep track of contextual, theoretical, and methodological elements relevant to the analysis during the data collection process (Baribeau, 2005).

### *Participants*

The teachers participating in this qualitative multiple-case study were selected by purposive sampling (Fortin, 2010). All the participants in the collective activity were invited to take part in the research. The discussion group was composed of six women and two men. Five of the participants were teachers of regular reception classes (RCT1, RCT2, RCT3, RCT4, and RCT5), one was a specialist (ST), and two were teachers of specialized reception classes. Of the two specialized reception teachers, one was in a class adapted to under-schooled students (UST) and one was in a partial-integration class (PICT). Six of the teachers were in their 2nd year in the reception department, and two of them were in their 1st year at the school where we conducted the research. They each had between 5 and 20 years of experience in education (two had 5 years, two 6 years, one 11 years, one 13 years, one 15 years, and one 20 years of practice). All of them, except the specialist, had completed university training in teaching French as a second language. Several teachers had an immigrant background (six out of eight were first or second generation).

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

To identify the units of meaning relevant to the content analysis of the data corpus according to the PPCT model, we created a coding grid that detailed the main components<sup>1</sup> and gave an example of each of the elements under study for mixed thematic coding (see Van der Maren, 1996). This approach allowed us to document the categories already

determined (according to the main components of the PPCT model including the four systems contained in the context) and make modifications to the initial grid as needed (e.g., adding or removing categories; Van der Maren, 1996). Thus, following the initial coding with the components of the PPCT model, we grouped the units of meaning into different subthemes (e.g., issues and challenges encountered when teaching students in reception classes, student-teacher relationships). Thematic coding was conducted using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12. Afterwards, a reverse coding was performed to remove units of meaning that may have been falsely included, and then a double intracoder validation (Van der Maren, 1996) of the entire corpus was performed with an agreement of 81.44%; these analyses were done more than 6 months apart. This procedure allowed us to validate the stability of the codes over time (Guikas et al., 2016). An inter-rater validation was also performed. While it was 72.15%<sup>2</sup> during the discussion group sessions, the percentage could not be identified during the interviews, as the countercoder performed the exercise on paper. Nevertheless, for both parts of the corpus, the divergent codes were discussed at all stages of the process in order to reach a consensus.

## RESULTS

We present here a cross-case analysis of teachers' perceptions of their work environment. The processes are perceptible through the bidirectional relationships between the developing individual, the teacher, and their context. Thus, with respect to the most salient topics discussed by the teachers, three main themes will be addressed: (a) participants' perceptions of the issues and challenges encountered when teaching students in reception classes, (b) relationships with school actors (e.g., fellow teachers and school administrators), and (c) the reception class department and school involvement. The relationships that will be detailed in this section are associated primarily with the individual's microsystems and mesosystems, given their direct relationships with the school community members involved.

### *Theme 1: Participants' perceptions of the issues and challenges encountered when teaching students in reception classes*

#### *Interest in teaching in a reception class*

Teachers' interest in the specifics of working in a reception class was discussed by all participants. They referred, in particular, to their commitment to meeting students' needs, to the special relationships they

have with their students, and to their commitment to supporting students' post-migratory adaptation to the host society:

I think that, as reception class teachers, perhaps we influence them a little more, as we are their first teaching model in Canada. ... The reception class teacher is not just a teacher. ... I don't know if I have what it takes, but I try to understand them as much as possible, and then there are students who have completely refused the idea of immigrating, so there is a blockage. (RCT5, I2)<sup>3</sup>

The students' characteristics, which change according to the individual and cohort, were, for seven teachers (RCT1, RCT2, RCT3, RCT4, RCT5, UST, and PICT), elements that can foster teachers' development at work because it creates a positive diversity in their tasks:

This is my 2nd year in the class of [partial integration]. It was a new experience for me. ... It's a new challenge ... and I love it. (PICT, I2)

I feel, really ... creative ... there is no specific program where you have to follow it to the letter and ... different origins, different needs. ... [The students] are really not the same, so for me, the task is enormous. ... It excites me. ... It's a job that is always renewed; there is always something new, and there are always new situations. (RCT3, I2)

Teachers emphasized the difference between the work done in regular and reception classes to highlight their interest in teaching newcomers. The uniqueness of the students and their needs was also frequently discussed during the interviews and discussion groups.

#### ***Diverse student needs***

The diverse profiles and needs of students in the reception classes were discussed by all teachers. In addition to issues and challenges related to the language barrier and academic learning, the participants mentioned characteristics tied to the students' pre-, peri-, and post-migration experiences that must be taken into consideration in teaching and responding to their needs, as evidenced in DG1:

PICT: Poor kid, he lived in refugee camps his whole life. Do you know what happens in the camps?

UST: He lived his whole life in the refugee camps; he lived in one until he was 11 years old. He saw all kinds of things ...

PICT: He needs a psychologist because otherwise there will never be any change.

Similarly, participants pointed to differences in educational backgrounds, such as previous school experience, discontinuities in educational pathways, and understanding of certain school regulations:

For example, the school rules: All students must wear a uniform. It's hard for them to understand that. He [the student] comes with another pair of jeans, black jeans and another polo shirt; you say to the student, "Look, this is not the uniform." ... "No, ma'am, this is black." They don't really understand. ... They lived in refugee camps, so there was no structure in their lives, there was no supervision, and then they end up in school here, and a lot of things are asked of them. (UST, I2)

It's that with the reception students, we can't do a course for everyone. It's ... it's that everyone has their needs, everyone has their difficulties, everyone has their level. I have four subgroups in my class. (UST, I1)

What teachers reported reminded us that the students' needs are multiple and unique. Teachers must therefore adapt to adequately support their group. Moreover, while attending classes and learning French is already a challenge, the participants underscored that the aim of the reception class goes beyond the sole mastery of the language:

As much as they are learning the language, they are learning how the system works. (RCT2, DG2)

I'm not there just to teach them French; I'm there to guide them in their learning and to ... for their integration as well, to integrate well into school life and society. (UST, I1)

Teacher participants discussed behaviours that should not be accepted in school. Some school staff members (e.g., educators and secretaries) were flexible as a way to help the reception class students. This disparity led to frustration among other reception class teachers who felt that those staff members were overlooking the fact that the students were also teenagers and testing the school rules. As one teacher participant shared:

When he arrives [late], everyone asks him if he has a reason for the delay; he takes his agenda and says, "Yes, it's approved." And then everyone laughs. It's because it's a running gag. ... They didn't understand [referring to the secretariat], he's been here for a year and a half! (RCT4, I1)

### *Organization of the school groups*

All the participants discussed the characteristics associated with their groups, which differed from regular curriculum classes. At the school where the data were collected, the groups were organized by the level of French proficiency. The reception department consisted of five regular reception classes, which brought together students with a similar level of French proficiency, as well as a partial integration class and a group of under-schooled students. Nevertheless, new arrivals in the groups and the

progress of some students led to some movement within the reception department:

[Last year], we tried to create the most homogeneous classes possible based on their acquisition of levels [of French proficiency], except that, well ... as the year goes on, now it's January – well, it's starting to get a little unbalanced. (RCT5, I1)

The challenges arising from the age differences between the students in the class were also addressed by two teachers (RCT5 and UST) during the individual interviews and were the subject of several conversations during the discussion group sessions (DG2, DG3, DG4, and DG8). Since the groups were created according to the level of French proficiency, the age of the students had not been considered. The classes were sometimes very heterogeneous in this respect:

There's a little room left in my class, so new students are coming into my group. ... It's starting to look like a potluck. The students who are older, late 17 ... it seems like they're there and they just want to finish the school year. ... I have some 13-, some 14- and some 16-year-olds. I also have three 17-year-olds and now I have one 18. ... It's ... it's weird. (RCT5, I1)

Differences in student age led to additional challenges for teachers, particularly in terms of taking student development into consideration. Student mobility and matching student fluency levels were other issues:

We have to fill in these gaps, and sometimes they don't necessarily ask us "Would this student be better in your class or in the other class?" ... I even had a misclassification – I had a student who was supposed to be integrated into regular 5th. ... That's one of many there. (RCT5, I1)

The diverse needs of the students and the particular organization of the classes could fuel teachers' interest in the reception classes. In addition to developing special connections with students, participants also discussed their frequent interactions with fellow reception teachers. Thus, student needs were a source of motivation for teachers.

### ***Theme 2: Relationships between school actors***

Participants reported having direct (microsystemic) relationships with other teachers. In both interviews, all teachers spoke of having, in general, good relationships with their reception class colleagues. Participants relied on collaboration, mutual aid, and understanding on the part of their fellow teachers. Conversely, all participants, except the specialist<sup>4</sup> and one of the reception class teachers, specified that their relationships with some regular teachers were not only superficial but could even be strained:

I have a good relationship with my colleagues, especially my colleagues who work in reception class; we have a good collaboration, and we get along well. ... With the regular teachers, not really ... because the regular teachers, they don't really know the reality of the reception class students. (UST, I1)

In explaining the less positive relationship between reception and regular class teachers, one participant mentioned that the tensions were the result of a lack of understanding regarding the realities of reception students:

As far as I'm concerned – I say it over and over again – regular schoolteachers don't know. ... They don't take into consideration the reality of the partial integration class and the reception classes. (PICT, I2)

Most teachers (six out of eight) supported the PICT's perception concerning regular curriculum teachers' lack of knowledge about reception classes. They also agreed that this misunderstanding fueled friction between the teachers involved in the different curricula. These issues were mostly discussed in I1. Through analysis of the discussion group transcripts, we came to understand that many students who were previously in the reception classes were integrated into the same regular class. This cohort effect could alter the classroom dynamics for regular teachers, as several students who were still learning French were placed together. Given that some adaptation was occasionally required by regular class teachers, they believed the students were not yet ready to be integrated into their class. Thus, due to a lack of knowledge about the "exit profile" of students from the reception classes, regular class teachers had misunderstandings about the level of language fluency expected at the end of the program and expressed doubts about the ability of the students to integrate into their class as well as concerns about the work of the reception class teachers:

When we send [these students] to a regular class, the teacher will think that they haven't mastered French enough and that they therefore must not be at the same level as a regular school student ... but this is not the case. (UST, I1)

It might be a lack of consideration [on the part of regular teachers] for the work that some reception teachers do. (RCT5, I1)

The PICT, who was working with the partial integration group, reported in DG4 her impression of her students starting their schooling in the regular curriculum classes:

PICT: For me, it's really stressful. You tell yourself you've worked hard, but when my students are integrated ... it's negative comments.

RCT1: We would have to prepare [the regular teachers]. ... Because this student there, he needs to be integrated, otherwise he will just go around in circles. ... These teachers would have to have patience like we have and accept these students ...

Three teachers (RCT2, RCT4, and PICT) addressed this issue again during I2 (at the end of the school year). The strained interpersonal relations with the regular teachers were discussed several times in the discussion groups (DG4, DG6, and DG8). However, they mentioned a positive evolution in some of the regular schoolteachers' perceptions of the students integrated into their class:

There was one teacher who came to see me to tell me that this and this student had made progress, so, yes, there was the negative side, but they were also able to recognize the good things that the students had done and say that they were making progress, so there was also room for discussion with them. (RCT2, I2)

#### *Relationships between administration members*

During the interviews and discussion groups, teachers frequently referred to the direct relationship they had with the assistant principal assigned to the reception department. Although the assistant principal was not familiar with the characteristics of the reception classes, some teachers noted her openness and willingness to learn in order to better support students:

[The assistant principal] is more used to working with the regular programs, but she really has the desire to understand reception and find the resources ... (RCT2, I1)

Sometimes, [the assistant principals] tell me, "Yes, you do a good job, we see that ... we see your relationship with your students, we see that they are difficult students and we see that you manage to manage this group," and all that, but sometimes, I tell you [they do not recognize my work] because they haven't given me the right conditions. (UST, I1)

However, the picture was different for the main principal, who seemed to be rather absent from the teachers' daily lives, as shown by this excerpt from DG6:

RCT4: But [the main principal], you never see; I never see him ...

RCT2: Well, that's it; he's a ghost.

UST: We don't know him, we don't know him ...

RCT4: He should get out of his office a little more often.

Conversely, in the same discussion group, one teacher spoke of the main principal's commitment to the reception classes:



PICT: [The principal] was really advocating for the reception of students, and I really appreciated that.

Participants emphasized that the characteristics associated with teaching newcomer students must be understood and considered by school administrators.

### ***Theme 3: Reception class department and school involvement***

Some participants, such as RCT4 in I1, mentioned other features of the reception class program, such as the activities that were offered to students:

Researcher: Are there a lot of activities that are offered to reception class students?

RCT4: Yes, because we have a new budget, that's why. We have a special measure for money. ... Before, there was never any, but now we have a lot of money, so, yes, we have special activities.

It should be noted that the data collection was carried out at the time of the arrival of several refugee families from Syria. A number of initiatives had been taken at that time to promote integration, including the granting of special funding for schools. Consistent with the PPCT model, this special monetary resource could be associated with the teachers' exosystem since it was not directly for them; nevertheless, it did impact their work context.

Other participants (PICT, RCT1, and RCT2) mentioned the reluctance of teachers from regular programs to integrate the reception class students in organized activities. This situation was limiting the willingness of some reception class teachers to get involved at the school level:

Yes, yes, but I would like to [get involved in the activities of the regular classes], but ... the reception classes, we are a little in our little shell there. I don't know why because the others, the regular ones, they have their own projects and all that, but ... (PICT, I1)

Five teachers out of seven (excluding the specialist) wanted to take part in school activities only if they were beneficial to the students from the reception department:

The reception teachers ... we're like a small, closed department, so getting involved a little bit more at the school level doesn't really appeal to me, but if there were something to do with the reception classes, [then] yes. (RCT2, I2)

One of the reception class teachers offered a rationale for her lack of interest in engaging in activities that would not benefit the students of her department:

I don't see how I can be involved in the success of the school. Anyway, the reception class students, it's not their school ... it's a service point. ... When people talk to me about the regular classes, I really don't care ... really. I don't know about the program, and it doesn't interest me, but everything that can be made for the reception class ... it really interests me. (RCT4, I1)

This explanation highlights the transitory nature of school for some reception students. In responding to a question about her desire to be involved in the school, the teacher clarified the impact this characteristic of the reception program has. Thus, this context (or system), which can be described as exosystemic since the transitional attribute is external to the school, may have an impact on her engagement with the school.

To summarize the situation described in the results section, it is possible to see how the characteristics of the students, their special needs, and the general organization of the reception classes may have created a gap between the reception and regular programs in the school where this research was conducted. While this institution had a physical space to accommodate newly arrived students enrolled in francization programs, several barriers, such as a lack of understanding of the expected profiles at the end of the program and the reception class curriculum by other members of the school community, may have impacted the teachers' experience. In the next section, we examine the distinction between the reception space and the reception culture within the school.

#### **DISCUSSION: SYSTEM SCISSIONS AND REORGANIZATION**

Our results shed light on the place of the reception classes in the school organization as perceived by teachers. The separation between the special program created to welcome immigrant children and the regular curriculum is documented in Quebec (e.g., Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018) and elsewhere (e.g., Obondo et al., 2016). For instance, the expression "a school within a school" was used by one of Obondo et al.'s (2016, p. 190) participants to describe his situation. Many aspects of teaching in reception classes can exacerbate these divisions. In this article, we note that pedagogical differentiation, age differences between the students in a group, and the creation of adapted teaching materials are some of the challenges faced by teachers. However, our results highlight some of the differences in the reception space that must be understood from a systemic perspective, as suggested by Norberg (2017) and Gagné et al. (2018). In addition to describing the special needs of immigrant children in their classes and their work to meet the needs of these students, the teachers involved in this research also distinguished the relationships

they had with teachers of the regular curriculum and members of the school administration as well as the activities in which their classes could be included. Those two last points corroborate the scission (separation) effect between the regular classes and reception groups described in other research (e.g., Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018; Obondo et al., 2016).

Drawing on the properties of context, as proposed in the multiple iterations of the model developed by Bronfenbrenner, we illustrate the systemic gap perceptible in the participants' interviews and during the eight sessions of the discussion groups (see Figure 1).

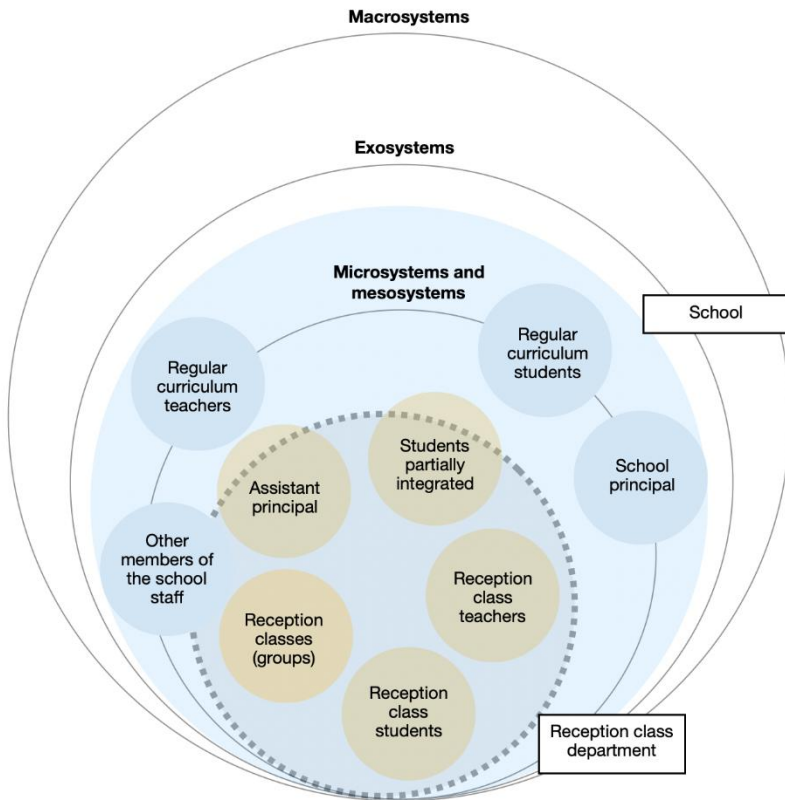


FIGURE 1. *Systemic gaps within the school (adapted from Mamprin, 2021)*

In Figure 1, the microsystemic and mesosystemic elements addressed by teachers when they were describing the reception class department are represented in five ways: (a) reception class students, (b) reception class of

partially integrated students, (c) reception class groups, (d) colleagues in the department, and (e) the assistant principal. The gray dotted line refers to the gap between the reception class department and the school. We also depict some elements external to the reception class department, such as the school principal, the regular curriculum students, the regular curriculum teachers, and other school staff members who occasionally work with youth in reception classes (e.g., the school secretary). If the school is a complex environment that includes relations of several systemic orders, we hypothesize that teachers in the reception class perceive it most of the time as an exosystem (rather than as a microsystem), as they are not directly involved in the activities of the institution except the ones specially designed for their department. Indeed, their connections to the school's main principal and to students in regular classes are, for the most part, with the students in their class or the assistant principal. Otherwise, when the participants were interacting with teachers in regular classes, the contact was not always positive and even had a deleterious effect on the teachers' sense of competence. While our representation is not exhaustive, it schematizes the reality described by the participants.

Other aspects noted in the participants' discourse reiterate the gap we have described. One of them is the perception students and teachers have that their school is transitory. Indeed, several students would need to transfer to another school upon completing their program, as it was not their designated neighbourhood school. Several participants emphasized that they wanted to be engaged in activities that served reception class students but that they were not interested in being involved at the school level. As stated by one of the participants, since the school would not be the assigned school for the students when they integrated into regular classes, he did not plan to be more integrated into school life. However, as stressed by Mc Andrew & Audet (2021), among others, the school should promote students' current and future social integration. Therefore, it is particularly important to include these elements to support the inclusion of immigrant students. Otherwise, the principles underlying measures that should promote student integration may not have the desired results.

If the school can be described as an organization of several systems, some of which can be considered as microsystemic, mesosystemic, or exosystemic, it is easy to establish a static categorization. However, this shortcut may deviate from the focus of the PPCT model: the development of the individual's experience and perception. While we documented a "systemic gap," this division needs to be understood as a dynamic process that may be influenced by each individual and environment.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As emphasized by Rubinstein-Avila (2017), immigration is not an event; it is a long and complex process. Some researchers have studied the trajectories and school context of students from immigrant backgrounds (e.g., Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). However, the results presented in this article provide a better understanding of the phenomenon by taking into account the point of view of the teachers who are part of the students' academic integration.

Teaching in a reception class brings its own set of challenges. For students, arrival in a reception class can be an important milestone, and they have a lot more than the language to learn. Therefore, it is important to take into account the practical needs of teachers in light of the varied and changing profiles of students. Student and teacher well-being are sometimes studied as two sides of the same coin (Roffey, 2012). By the same logic, we have discussed elements that may illustrate a gap between regular and reception classrooms that, due to students' special needs, may have spillover effects on teachers' experiences. These findings are consistent with the results of Obondo et al. (2016) and Papazian-Zohrabian et al., (2018). In order to reduce this symbolic gap, which affects the experience of teachers and students, it is important to be aware of the difference between the space needed to welcome newly arrived students and the culture of welcoming that is established in a school. While our participants observed that some teachers in the regular curriculum overestimated the language proficiency of newly integrated students, other studies point out that teachers have, on the contrary, lower expectations of students with an immigrant background (e.g., Brault et al., 2014).

We emphasize the importance of providing training for teachers and other members of the school community to clarify the role of reception classes and what should be expected when students enter regular classes. This could reduce possible misunderstandings and lead to the inclusion of teachers and students in school activities. These activities that include the reception class could also foster connections between students and between teachers. Moreover, we consider it important to be mindful of the demands of these classes (e.g., specific materials and consistency in the application of certain school rules). Training on the needs of students and the realities of reception classes can foster a sense of competence among teachers as well as promote recognition of their work.

Reception classes should be a means to help students integrate rather than a barrier. Demeuse and Baye (2008) stress that equity practices can contribute to the reinforcement of exclusionary processes or the

emergence of new ones. That said, Archambault et al. (2018), building on the work of Mc Andrew et al. (2015), point out that the ability of schools to identify barriers that are related to an organization or its practices can lead to greater school engagement in finding solutions. It would be fruitful for future research to study and compare other models of immigrant student integration to identify the strengths and challenges in such contexts, such as closed reception classes, reception classes with partial integration, full integration models with French language support, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> Such reflection can help provide solutions to the schools which are on the front line in the integration of students. While some targeted actions may be successful, a systemic perspective captures the complexity of the school context. When reception class programs are newly implemented, it becomes even more important to consider strategies that can be put in place to prevent systemic gaps, ensuring the inclusion of all participants in the process.

#### NOTES

1. In our research, well-being at work was the angle of analysis for the person and the processes were studied through social support.
2. This value usually needs to be close to 75% in order to be considered sufficient (Shweta et al., 2015; Stemler, 2004). If it is below the suggested value, the difficulties inherent in the corpus, especially in regard to the identification of meaning units (see Mamprin, 2021), may explain this counter coding score.
3. Nicknames were given to teachers to preserve their anonymity.
4. The specialist teacher was also working in the regular programs and was not in charge of a reception class.
5. See De Koninck and Armand (2012b) for a discussion on integration models.

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