

Understanding How Parenting & Family Literacy Centres Help Families Experiencing Poverty  
& Immigration

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

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Master of Arts

Early Childhood Studies

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**Abstract**

This study examines the various ways in which Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLC) can support families in relation to needs that arise from poverty and immigration.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used as a theoretical lens in this study.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from 12 focus groups. Three main themes related to immigration and poverty and the supports from PFLCs emerged from the data analysis: (1) Environment; (2) Resources; and (3) Socializing. The findings present the parents' responses from their participation in the focus group and are an indication of how parents believe PFLCs can support them. Implications of these results are discussed and recommendations for educators are provided.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Gonzalo Realmo and Guadalupe Hernández, who made many sacrifices in order to provide their children with opportunities that were never presented to them. My parents taught me to work hard by role modelling their work ethic, often working 2-3 jobs each, and opting to live in a 2 bedroom apartment just so we could go to private school. For their selfless love and devotion, I am eternally grateful.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Parents and caregivers are a major influence on a child's development. The life circumstances of parents and caregivers can have a significant effect on the environment in which the child develops. According to Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), when a child has an intimate and reliable relationship that provides love, a nurturing environment, security, responsive interaction, and the opportunity to explore, the child can thrive. Parents and other caregivers, thus, have an immense influence on early childhood experiences. Poverty and immigration are two experiences that have an effect on the degree of support that parents receive for their role in children's development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Poverty is a critical social issue in Canada. Identifying the scope of this issue has been challenging as Canada does not have an official measurement of poverty (Colin & Campbell, 2008). In Canada there have been efforts to reduce poverty, including political promises to eradicate child poverty (Campaign 2000, 2012). Despite these efforts, data from food banks across Canada indicate that food bank use has increased, and that approximately 38% of those using food banks are children and youth (Food Banks Canada, 2012). The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives reports that "racialized groups and recent immigrants are more likely to live in poverty, have low paying jobs, or be unemployed compared to the non-racialized Canadian population" (Canada Without Poverty, 2012, para. 8). It can be assumed that families living in poverty, including those who are newly immigrated, may have fewer supports for a number of reasons including lack of financial means to access services, employment instability, and stresses related to food, housing, and other basic needs. For families living in poverty, community supports may address some of these stressors (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is important to distinguish that not all families experiencing poverty are immigrants and not all immigrant families experience poverty.



Many scholars believe that in order to assess a child's development, one cannot focus solely on the child. One must also look at the child's family, their available resources, and the environment in which the child is growing up (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Children who live in poverty are more likely to enter school with fewer of the language, literacy, social, and other skills needed to ensure school success (Child Trends & Center for Child Health Research, 2004). As well, immigrant children, who are a fast growing portion of the population, also face many challenges such as language barriers, having parents with different beliefs and experiences than the dominant culture and poverty (Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008). In the context of these challenges (and others) it is important for society to support parents and families.

This study examines one program that is designed to support parents and families who live in low income and high immigration neighbourhoods. Many scholars understand that a perpetual state of poverty coupled with immigration status can have adverse effects on a child's development and a parent's ability to ensure academic success for their children. School failure feeds into the cycle of poverty, making it difficult to break. This is why it is important for society and government to take action. The government of Ontario has recognized the importance of the relationship that a parent has with their child and through the Ministry of Education, they have created and funded programs called Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs). PFLCs are based on pre-existing models from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and were first established in 1981 in five inner city schools in Toronto where students were at risk for academic failure (Yau, 2010). These schools were located in neighbourhoods that were deemed to be 'high needs' and programs were created specifically to target the families and children in these areas. The aim of the program was to guide parents and caregivers on how to engage in the school system in order to facilitate their children's transition into kindergarten. In addition to preparing children for school,

PFLCs also offered parenting support and linked families with resources within the community for children with exceptionalities, health, and other services related to children and families (Yau, 2010).

PFLCs are designed to support parents and caregivers to engage in their child's development. PFLCs provide a school-based program in which parents and caregivers participate with their children, birth to age six, in a variety of activities that focus on the development of the child and the attainment of early literacy and numeracy skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). While PFLCs originally began with the intent to promote school readiness skills in pre-school children, they now provide a much broader array of services such as linking families to community resources like housing and legal aid that will not only benefit the child but the entire family as well (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

### **Research Purpose**

This study seeks to understand the multiple ways in which a PFLC supports families in relation to needs that arise from immigration and income disparity. The data for this study is part of a larger study exploring what parents perceive as key outcomes from participation in early years programs, specifically PFLCs which are situated in schools and operated by school boards. This project analyzes data specifically related to the themes of poverty and immigration, while the larger study examines the larger political and social context of parent participation in PFLCs. The purpose of this research is not to evaluate the PFLC itself but rather to recognize the needs parents associate with immigration and poverty and how a PFLC can best support those needs. The research question that guided this data analysis process was:

What are the needs that parents identify as resulting from poverty and immigration and which supports do they receive from Parenting and Family Literacy Centres?

## **Researcher Perspective**

Morrow (2005) states that it is important for a researcher to present their biases and assumptions upfront in order to remain subjective throughout the process as it allows the reader to have an understanding of the researcher's perspective and how it affects the research. This is critical because in qualitative research, the researcher's self is involved and their life experiences are used as a resource (Holloway & Bailey, 2011). This study is important to me as the topic of poverty and immigration are both experiences that I have lived. Although I was born and raised along with my two siblings in Chicago, IL, my mother was an immigrant from México. As a child, I recall quite vividly how difficult life was for my parents to 'break even' every month and the challenges my mother endured in everyday life such as finding work or communicating with our teachers due to the language barriers, racism and prejudice. The responsibility often fell on us to interpret and communicate for her and looking back, I can only imagine the loss of power my mother must have felt to have to depend on her young children to do these things for her. Because of the racial tensions at the time, my mother's status was often used to make me feel inferior to the dominant culture. While my elementary school did provide a setting in which parents could attend for parenting workshops, the environment was perceived by my mother as one of judgment where educators focused on 'fixing' the person rather than helping them. This made it difficult for my mother to develop any social networks as the environment was not perceived to be welcoming.

As a Mexican-American, I have struggled with my identity. In Chicago, I was made to feel as though I did not belong because I did not fit in with the dominant culture and in México, I was also told I did not belong for the same reasons. As a result, growing up with a hyphenated identity, I lacked a sense of belonging from the conflicting messages I was receiving. As an adult who now calls Canada home, I'm experiencing those same feelings once again; not knowing exactly where I belong. Because of my

experiences with immigration and poverty, I feel that I am able to relate to the participants in this study and believe that this can be an asset when analyzing data.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this research because of its explanation of the systems that act upon and affect a family. Bronfenbrenner distinguishes these systems into three different models: mesosystems, exosystems, and chronosystems. The mesosystem model claims that external systems like genetics can influence a person's interactions with their environment, the relationship between family and peer groups, as well as the relationship between family and school. The exosystem model describes three exosystems that can affect the development of a child through the influences of family processes such as the parent's employment, parent's social networks, and the influence of the community on the family functioning. The chronosystem model suggests that life transitions can have an effect on family processes and child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

This theory highlights the impacts of the contexts between the individual, their family, communities, and the social environment that shapes a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory claims that each system influences the other as well as facilitates the effects of others. Since a parent is believed to be the closest influence on a child and their development and therefore mediates the influence of school and community. The parent is also influenced by the factors from the systems closest to them such as work, community, etc. The researcher selected Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1986) as it can apply to families experiencing immigration and poverty.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The following section will define poverty, present the various ways to measure it, and outline the implications it has on parenting and child outcomes, with a focus on immigrant families. The focus on immigrant families will be made because they are a fast growing portion of the population and face many challenges that include poverty. Next, literature on parenting and family literacy programs is presented as a mechanism to ameliorate the effects of poverty on immigrant families. An analysis of the literature revealed areas that warrant consideration when understanding poverty and immigration in relation to supporting parents. Among such areas are; the relationship between economic status and child developmental outcomes, the relationship between economic status and immigration, and the supports that parents report as effective in supporting them in their role as parents.

### **Poverty**

This section begins with an examination of the literature on poverty because many studies have noted the relation between poverty and low academic outcomes (Anderson Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009; Noble, Duch, Darvique, Grundleger, Rodriguez, & Landers, 2011). A definition of poverty will be provided based on the literature as well as the various ways to measure poverty. The implications of poverty and the deficit views of the culture of poverty will be discussed as it is important to understand what this means in relation to teacher beliefs of poverty and how this may affect children's experiences in early childhood programs.

#### **What is Poverty?**

Accepted definitions of poverty can depend on the experience which one has had with having access to adequate resources for a good life. To some, poverty may mean lacking basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. To others, poverty can mean that one does not have free will and is unable to make choices that pertain to oneself. Yet, others may view poverty as social exclusion resulting from

reduced choices and being unable to provide or attain the basic needs which can exclude one from being able to fully participate in society. According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, poverty is defined as “A human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights” (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2012). This definition is significant to this study as it allows one to view poverty as the inability to meet physical needs as well as social needs.

In Canada, the federal government has yet to endorse an official definition of poverty (Colin & Campbell, 2008). Currently, the main measures of poverty are: Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICO), defined as “an income threshold below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family” (Government of Canada, 2010, para. 1); Low Income Measures (LIM), defined as “a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted household income, where “adjusted” indicates that household needs are taken into account. Adjustment for household sizes reflects the fact that a household’s needs increase as the number of members increases” (Government of Canada, 2009, para. 1); Market Basket Measures (MBM) is defined as “It includes the costs of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other expenses for a reference family of two adults aged 25 to 49 and two children (aged 9 and 13). It provides thresholds for a finer geographic level than the low income cut-off (LICO), allowing, for example, different costs for rural areas in the different provinces. These thresholds are compared to disposable income of families to determine low income status” (Government of Canada, 2010, para. 1). Regardless of the multiple ways to define poverty in Canada, the fact that remains that it is prevalent and inexcusable.

### **Implications of Poverty.**

Poverty is associated with poor outcomes related to child development. Research suggests parents of children living in poverty are more likely to have less education than the parents of their more affluent peers, thus affecting their ability to provide a cognitively stimulating environment and are more likely to attend schools with limited resources than schools in more prosperous neighbourhoods (Anderson Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009).

It is believed that these outcomes may be changed when interventions are put in place. While many interventions for children living in poverty have typically focused on the parents and parenting skills, research suggests that combining various types of interventions can be successful. One intervention that has been found to be beneficial is family literacy programs as it is believed that poverty is linked to poor literacy skills and vice versa (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Further, a child's success in school is also contingent on the level of parent involvement (Noble, Duch, Darvique, Grundleger, Rodriguez, & Landers, 2011). However, when a parent has difficulty reading, it can often be challenging for their children to achieve a high level of literacy and can ultimately hinder school performance and affect child development.

### ***Deficit approaches: The Culture of Poverty view***

There is a term that is used by educators called 'the culture of poverty' which refers to characteristics or traits that pertain to individuals who live in poverty (Lewis, 1963; Payne, 2001). 'Culture of poverty' is a term used to describe people living in a cycle of poverty. Oscar Lewis, an American sociologist first coined the term when he conducted ethnographic research in Mexico City, studying people who lived in slums. Lewis wrote an article in 1963 where he discusses some common misunderstandings of the culture of poverty. Lewis (1963) claims that people who are poor do not necessarily live in a culture of poverty since people from all walks of life can experience poverty at one

time or another. According to Lewis (1963), experiencing impoverished living conditions does not mean that you are a member of the culture of poverty. Lewis illustrates this point by giving an example of Jewish people in Eastern Europe. While some Jewish people lived in the slums for quite some time, Lewis argues that they would not belong to the culture of poverty because their religion gave them a sense of identity and sense of belonging to a community with a strong heritage and belief system. Therefore, living in a culture of poverty means more than just being poor, it means being marginalized and excluded from society for not belonging.

Lewis argues that people who live in poverty are aware of the many ways that the system (government) fails to take their needs or interests into consideration, perpetuating a feeling of hopelessness and inferiority. Lewis goes on to say that in addition to feeling helpless, people living in a culture of poverty lack a knowledge of their own history, making them aware only of their own troubles, thus making it difficult to get out of the culture of poverty. Lewis also argues that the notion of eliminating poverty is unrealistic as it is a culture and the idea of wiping out a culture is unethical as it fails to respect cultural differences. This deficit theory of some people's experiences with poverty persists today.

For instance, Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson (2008) have written an article in which they critique the work of author, Ruby Payne, specifically her book, 'A Framework for Understanding Poverty' (2001), a professional development text that intends to inform teachers about the lives and minds of children from poor households. Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson (2008) argue that Payne is misleading her audience, which consists primarily of educators, with her proclamations of what she calls a 'culture of poverty' as her claims are unfounded by research and serve only to perpetuate the deficits view of poverty in existence (Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). Dworin & Bomer provide a little background on Ruby Payne; she is a well-known consultant to school districts and provides workshops for educators on



how to work with children from low income families as she argues that children from low income families have minds that work differently than children who are middle class. Ruby Payne claims to be an expert on “the mindsets of economic classes” (aha! Process, Inc., 2012) so therefore knows how to overcome the challenges of poverty. She provides workshops and seminars in the United States, Canada, Australia, England, and Ireland on how to understand the mentality of families who are poor and provides ways to work with children from low income families (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008). Many researchers and scholars have criticized her work/framework for various reasons but especially because she has gained wealth from her workshops that exploit and misrepresent families who are experiencing poverty (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). Researchers who have read and critiqued her work have noted that Payne fails to identify issues such as equity, social justice, and diversity (Gorski, 2008).

According to Gorski (2008), Payne is the leading voice on class and poverty in the U.S. education scene. She is someone in a position of privilege and power and therefore has a different perspective of poverty and believes that change can be made without the participation of those who will be the most affected by it. The language in her text is described as negative, and has a deficit view/lens (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). She portrays poor children as damaged and implies that educators must ‘fix’ poor people’s children to fit the mould of the dominant culture, the middle-class, rather than identifying ways in which the system can be fixed.

Several studies have examined how education can combat the persistent view of a culture of poverty (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010). Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford (2010) identified several strategies for teacher preparation programs to better prepare teachers to support children living in poverty. The authors argue that equity begins with the school environment and employing teachers who believe that all students can learn regardless of their background and are willing

to take accountability for their student's learning. When teachers focus on students' strengths rather than their weaknesses, students are encouraged to do well in school. In order to create a positive classroom environment, it is important for teachers to learn about their students' cultures, families and community so that they can create lessons and activities that are relevant to the student.

It is also important for teachers to have strategies that support parent involvement from all families. For example, conferences with parents do not necessarily have to be held in a school but instead can be held in other parts of the community that are more accessible to parents. Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford (2010) state that while suggestions that take into consideration the needs of families experiencing poverty or immigration will be beneficial, it is important to create these changes early on in teacher education programs. They suggest that teacher education programs provide students with practicum experiences that are diverse so that they can observe and implement strategies to work with children experiencing poverty. Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford (2010) argue that if educators are to be successful in teaching diverse students, it is imperative that teacher education programs address children's experiences with poverty.

In a study by Comber and Kamler (2004) teachers found that their own deficit views of poverty affected their teaching practice. Comber and Kamler's study was an action research project that paired 10 novice teachers with 10 experienced teachers in a community with a high population of immigrant families from Central Asia and South America and where the large majority of students spoke a language other than English in their home. The teacher/researchers were asked to interview each other, and then work with a child they selected through home visits and curricular adaptations. The purpose of the research was to get teachers to understand the complexities of children and families living in poverty by developing a case study and analysing their own observations. The process allowed the teacher/researchers to challenge themselves to address their biases.

Throughout this process, the researchers soon noticed the negative ways in which teachers would refer to their students and families (Comber & Kamler, 2004). The teachers were asked to participate in workshops where the researchers discussed research methods and presented ways to conduct interviews, make observations within the classroom, and how to write narratives. Comber & Kamler (2004) used this opportunity to highlight the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, (1992) and introduce them to the term ‘funds of knowledge’, where teachers visit families in their home in order to learn about family strengths. Comber & Kamler (2004) also illustrated the notion of ‘virtual schoolbags’, where Thomson, (2008) states that all children’s schoolbags are full however, only a few students will have the opportunity to utilize what is inside of their schoolbag. Both metaphors were helpful in showing teachers that there is much to consider when thinking of children and families living in poverty. Comber and Kamler (2004) state “the most important variable at school in making a difference for students is the teacher” (p. 294). The research method illustrates the capacity for teachers to change their viewpoint and assumptions about children’s experiences of poverty.

In Comber & Kamler’s (2004) study, teachers found that they took part in discourses that had the tendency to blame the family for the student’s low achievement in school. With the help of Comber & Kamler (2004), teachers were able to explore newer and more beneficial ways to reach out to their ‘at risk’ students. By visiting the student in their home and observing the way they interacted with their families, the teachers were able to use the family’s many strengths to adjust their modes of instruction to ensure the student met the curriculum requirements.

To summarize, educators and researchers are aware of the implications that experiencing poverty can have on children’s development and their academic outcomes. As well, the deficit views of families living in poverty continue to be persistent within educational settings and families continue to be looked down upon for living in these situations. The literature on poverty indicated that a teacher’s attitudes and

beliefs about families experiencing poverty were key factors in determining the way they worked with children. The research states that teachers who are able to shift the way they view families experiencing poverty from a deficit point of view to a more strength based approach, can make a tremendous difference to those children and their families. As it is well known that poverty can affect child development and academic outcomes, it is also known that immigration and poverty are often related. Not only is it important for educators to understand poverty but it is equally important to understand how immigration can affect a child's academic outcome. Additionally, it is important for educators to have an awareness that not all families experiencing poverty are immigrants and not all immigrant families experience poverty.

### **Immigration & Poverty**

Much like poverty, immigration can have an adverse effect on a parent's ability to ensure the healthy development of young children. The act of migration is complex and can often be very stressful and involve great risks. The following section will discuss the unique experiences of immigrant parents such as mental and physical health, the effects of stress in their role in a child's development and education, the importance of having a social network, and the educator's role in understanding their experiences as well as being/becoming an agent that facilitates the bridge for the immigrant parent and social networks.

### **Immigrant Parents & Stress**

Migration can be a very stressful process and it is also important to consider the reasons why families immigrate in the first place. New immigrants are at an increased risk for mental and physical health problems (Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005). It is believed that this is due to the stress and trauma they may have experienced in the process of migration. Some immigrants have had previous exposure to traumatic experience in their homeland such as war, famine, and natural disasters, which have

contributed to the reasons to emigrate. In addition to this trauma, immigrants may also experience a loss of family and social networks, making the adjustment to their new life challenging (Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005).

Adjustment to a new life involves many stressors. Often, immigrants migrate to escape poverty in their home country and provide better opportunities for their children (Ali, 2008; Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005). While some immigrants have high levels of education, poverty rates have significantly gone up among new immigrants (Picot, Hou, & Coulombe, 2008). With immigrant families experiencing poverty, some families may have to live in neighbourhoods where crime is high but rent is low, affecting the sense of security and adding more stress (Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Schools located in high crime neighbourhoods often provide an inferior level of education when compared to a school in a safe neighbourhood perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Due to the stress immigrant parents experience, some may suffer from conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic disorders that can be exacerbated by risk factors such as poverty, education, unemployment, and low-self-esteem (Pumariiega, Rothe, & Pumariiega, 2005).

### **Immigration & Social Capital**

It is believed that an immigrant has a heightened chance of experiencing poverty within the first few years of life in their new country (Kazemipur, 2006; Picot, Hou, & Coulombe, 2008; Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Picot, Hou, and Coulombe (2008) examined the link between poverty among new immigrants in Canada. The authors found that there is a large earnings gap among new immigrants and native Canadians and this gap continues to rise. The authors indicate that characteristics of new immigrants such as education quality and language skills can explain the increasing gap in earnings

among new immigrants and native Canadians. Picot and Hou (2003) found that immigrant poverty rates have significantly gone up among new immigrants despite the increasing educational level of new immigrants. They found that poverty was most common in new immigrants regardless of their education, ability to speak an official language and in all family types. Most disturbing was the finding that the gap in poverty rate between immigrants and native-born was the highest for new immigrants with university degrees, specifically those with engineering or applied science degrees. This begs the question: if education is believed to break the cycle of poverty, then why are highly educated immigrants experiencing poverty?

Researchers have stated that one reason that contributes to poverty among new immigrants can be a family member's precarious legal status in Canada (Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007). A family member's precarious legal status can have a vast impact on their young children regardless of the child's legal status, especially when attempting to access services such as health care and education (Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007). Well-being is a key component in an immigrant's ability to adapt and integrate in their new host country (Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). As mentioned earlier, the settlement process can be challenging because of the experiences and factors that occur before and after migration. One challenge that is common among new immigrants is the attainment of feeling valued and respected by their community, having a sense of belonging. Another challenge is having the ability to access social services as having access to these services is vital to well-being.

It is believed that families who do not have legal status in Canada are more likely to be excluded and marginalized from society (Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). This reality impacts children the most even if they are native-born. Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, and Wilson (2007) describe

three themes that emerged when studying the effects of precarious status on families' well-being: limited access to services; pervasive feelings of fear and isolation; and the impacts on children both Canadian and foreign born. Many participants in Bernhard et.al's study mentioned their inability to access services such as health care and education as they experienced many barriers as a result of their precarious status. In Toronto, families lacking legal status are not eligible to apply for childcare subsidy. As well, families without legal status are not eligible to receive the Canada Child Tax Benefit that is given to families with children under the age of eighteen. Because the cost of childcare is so high, families in these situations may find it difficult to be able to work. As well, participants in Bernhard et.al's (2007) study spoke of not being able to attain employment as they did not have the required permission to work in Canada. Not being employed affects these families' chances of attaining legal status in Canada as it is costly to go through the immigration process. This contributes to poverty. Bernhard et.al's (2007) study is one example of some of the reasons why immigrant families may experience poverty.

Kazemipur (2008) conducted a study in which he investigated the dynamics of social networks among immigrants and how the development of these social networks can often contribute to disadvantages. Kazemipur (2008) discusses how an immigrant's social capital is affected by their ability to develop social networks. He explains that the notion of social capital is influenced by not only the amount of knowledge we have and the material things that we possess but also by who we know. Kazemipur (2008) continues to explain that social capital can have an impact on an individual's life. For example, social capital can affect an individual's chances of finding a job, ability to assist their children in academic endeavours, whether or not they feel safe in their community, and mental and physical health (Kazemipur, 2008). This is important to consider when thinking about families who are experiencing poverty and immigration as they may lack social capital since it takes time to establish.

In his study, Kazemipur (2008) found that there is a significant difference in the size of social networks between immigrants and native-born Canadians and believes that this is due to the fact that immigrants tend to rely greatly on their communities, limiting their interaction with other communities therefore decreasing their social networks. Kazemipur (2008) argues that the danger in having smaller social networks increases the likelihood of isolation and loneliness as there is very little emotional and social support in times of need. This can also affect upward mobility since being part of a larger social network presents more opportunity to access resources. It is evident that immigrants are at a disadvantage when it comes to social networks. Immigrants need to develop a sense of belonging and this can only be accomplished if they are welcomed in a warm and safe environment. These findings are important to this study because the researcher is investigating the ways in which a PFLC can meet the identified needs of families experiencing poverty and immigration.

### **An Immigrant Parent's Role in Education**

Children, too, can be affected by the immigration process and experience challenges in adjusting to their new life because parents are often too overwhelmed themselves to address their children's social and emotional needs (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). Immigrant children display similar conditions as their parents such as anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorders (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). These conditions along with factors such as a parent's emotional well-being and peer relationships can impair academic functioning (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). There is a need to support immigrant parents in the engagement of their child's development and education.

Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Calabrese Barton (2005) conducted research that utilizes an ethnographic methodology to convey the stories of immigrant parents' experiences in participating in their children's education. They state that although the literature on parent involvement is vast, there is



very little focus on an immigrant parent's experience. The authors state that school administrators emphasize the importance of parent involvement within schools in order to benefit academic outcomes. School administrators have created spaces in which parents can become involved in such as Parent Councils, school festivals, volunteering in a classroom or on a field trip. Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton (2005) state that many may argue that these types of 'involvement' are one sided and only serve the benefit of the school, not necessarily the child's development or academic outcomes. The authors also state that there is a limited amount of power that parents have within these spaces to offer opinions as these structures are already in place. It is believed that parents who agree with what is already in place are viewed as 'cooperative' while parents who disagree and perhaps challenge these structures can be viewed as 'problematic'. This inequity of power between parents and schools can be concerning especially in a school with a high percentage of immigrant families located in a low income community as many educators may already have a deficit view of these families.

Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Calabrese Barton (2005) state that a poor and working class immigrant parent faces many challenges trying to engage in their children's education to ensure healthy development as they encounter many other challenges. First, immigrants must establish themselves in their new host country and create new lives in an unfamiliar culture. This means that they must develop new understandings of the way they view the world, create new social circles, perhaps learn a new language and determine how to access social services like education and healthcare. Second, an immigrant parent may feel conflicted with the idea of trying to 'fit in' and conform to a new life in a culture that may reject their presence but welcome their labour. Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Calabrese Barton (2005) believe that no matter how hard they work, immigrants will always be positioned as outsiders both in their new host country as well as their home country as their experiences may have affected the way they view themselves in the world.

Because an immigrant parent may experience many challenges adapting to their new host country, the ability to engage in their child's school may prove to be difficult as well. Some immigrant families may have limited knowledge in English, making it difficult to communicate with teachers and principals. Often the children are asked to translate for the parents, thus, creating a shift in power in both the family and the school. Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Calabrese Barton (2005) state that "language is an instrument of identity and power" therefore, if an immigrant parent is unable to use their language to communicate, it can be assumed that they have lost authority. In addition to language barriers, immigrant parents may lack a comprehensive understanding of the school's curriculum and the way schools operate which can affect a parent's ability to become involved. There is a need to develop an understanding of an immigrant parent's experience in engaging with schools and their children's development. PFLCs are programs targeted to communities that are deemed 'high needs' and share characteristics. Because a PFLC is intended to create a bridge between families and schools and serves the purpose of introducing families to schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) this study will attempt to identify the ways in a PFLC can meet the needs identified by parents related to immigration.

### **Family Literacy programs**

As previously mentioned, family literacy programs are believed to be an effective intervention when addressing poverty (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Most researchers claim that literacy is an essential skill that determines the success of individuals in their career aspirations as well as their quality of life (Swick, 2009; Timmons, 2008). Literacy is also a vital skill that children need in order to do well in school as their academic success is dependent on the skills the child has acquired in the early years prior to entering school (Swick, 2009; Timmons, 2008). A child who experiences difficulty with early literacy may continue to struggle throughout their educational careers, heightening the possibility of school failure (Timmons, 2008). Failures in school influence every aspect of our society since it creates economic and

social problems that affect the lives of all citizens (Anderson Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For example, families who have literacy challenges tend to face social issues which often lead to cycles of poverty where unemployment prevails (Timmons, 2008).

Teachers often complain that parents do not participate in reading events held at school and therefore, are at a loss on how to promote the importance of reading to parents (Barone, 2011). To add to this challenge, teachers may not speak the language of the parents, making it difficult to communicate the importance of reading and encouraging participation in school programs. Barone (2011) discusses a project designed to promote literacy skills and activities to parents who are experiencing poverty and speak English as an additional language. Barone (2011) acknowledges that while engaging families in literacy events is important for a child's success at school, many teachers find it challenging to elicit parent involvement in schools with a high poverty and linguistically diverse population.

In Barone's study (2011), a project was created to engage parents to participate in reading events held by the school. The school was a kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school with a majority of students classified as Latino (64%). When students were assessed, 50% of students within this group possessed limited proficiency in English. As well, the school was considered a high-poverty school based on the amount of students requiring free or reduced lunch (68%). Teachers sought collaboration with parents but noticed that parents were reluctant. While teachers complained that families are simply not involved, they failed to take into consideration the factors that may contribute to this. For example, many families experiencing poverty may not have an environment rich in literacy, may work more than one job, and based on the population of the school may not speak the dominant language.

Upon assessment of kindergarten students at the beginning of the year, it was discovered that students possessed strong oral skills in Spanish but had little to no oral skills in English. Further, it was noted that students had little to no knowledge of the alphabet or how to handle a book. Teachers soon became concerned of how they would develop their students' literacy with so many barriers in place. To address the school's low level of literacy, they employed two literacy coaches to support literacy development and also employed a bilingual parent facilitator with fluency in the students' home language (Barone, 2011).

Barone (2011) found that the parent facilitator's role was crucial when engaging parents and this was done by building trust. The parent facilitator welcomed parents when they arrived at school, translated for parents, and participated in all events for families held at the school. Barone (2011) discovered that parents were more willing to participate once trust and comfort were established with the parents. A program for parents to assist their children in the development of literacy skills was started. The parent facilitator prepared for the program by obtaining books in Spanish that were easy to read and would support parents' knowledge. The parent facilitator implemented many techniques to develop literacy skills while reading to the children as the parents observed. The parent facilitator made sure to praise the children in their efforts and commented on how wonderful it was that they knew how to speak two languages. This approach focused on the children's and families' strengths rather than their deficits. Parents were then asked to implement these same techniques at home with their children to maintain consistency in the process.

At the end of the school year, Barone noted that each kindergartener that participated in the project was able to recognize the letters of the alphabet, understood concepts related to books, were able to read certain words, and demonstrated an interest in writing. As well, children maintained their fluency in

Spanish and gained fluency in English. Parents expressed pleasure in their children's outcomes and felt they were a huge part of their children's success.

While research suggests that family literacy is a way to counter poverty, researchers have found challenges that families encounter when attending family literacy programs. Prins & Schafft (2009) analyzed the attitudes of family literacy practitioners' towards poverty and found that many of the family literacy practitioners held very negative views about the participants in their program. Family literacy practitioners stated that many of the parents in their program did not value education and used this to rationalize why the parents lived in poverty. A deficit view is problematic because it contradicts the obligations that are typical in their line of work and can adversely affect the quality of the interaction with families. Another challenge in implementing a family program is the lack of diversity found amongst family service practitioners, making it difficult to relate to the families in the centres. Timmons (2008) in a study from Prince Edward Island found that cultural homogeneity amongst family literacy centre staff was a limitation.

Reyes & Torres believe that building a family literacy curriculum with democratic participation would make it relevant, socially responsive and beneficial when working with communities, in particular ones that are marginalized. The literature states that literacy programs that are family-centered in design are the most successful because they value the input provided by parents as they attempt to include all parental figures such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. (Swick, 2009; Timmons, 2008). As well, Reyes and Torres (2007) believe that a family literacy program that considers meeting the needs of a family is a way of working towards social justice since family literacy programs can take place in communities where families are at high risk.

Bernhard (2010) states that the real challenge in implementing a successful family literacy program lies not with the parent or the facilitator but with the system and argues that there is a need to transform the entire structure. Bernhard (2010) designed interventions to help immigrant parents of Latino origin to understand their position of marginality and provide them with the tools to help support their children's education in their new host country.

Bernhard suggests that in order for an educational program to be successful, it would have to begin at a grassroots level using a collaborative problem-solving model rather than a "banking" model (Freire, 1999). This approach is idyllic as it would give an opportunity for both the family literacy practitioner and the parent to exchange ideas and information in order to create a curriculum that will meet the needs of the families in the community. For example, in Bernhard's (2010) parent group intervention, she worked on a monthly basis with a group of 12 Latin American parents over an eight month period to discuss aspects of their children's experience with Canadian schools. Bernhard (2010) connected with parents and enlisted them as partners in generating knowledge through discussion rather than simply being passive recipients of knowledge. Parents were encouraged to act as co-facilitators of these discussions, and throughout this process, parents began to gain each other's trust and together they were able to identify the barriers to their involvement in the educational system (Bernhard, 2010). The parents posed problems that they were encountering, engaged in discussion, and with the assistance of facilitators and other parents, were able to develop an awareness of their situation and learned how to take action to counteract their feeling of not being welcome in their child's school (Bernhard, 2010). Due to this intervention, parents in this study were now aware of the policies that encouraged parent participation and learned that they could challenge labels of deficiency that they were being assigned. Bernhard found that parents who participated in this intervention began to attend parent meetings at the school with more frequency and were cognizant that they were expected to take an active role in their child's education

(2010). Furthermore, parents were shown that “they had little to fear and much to gain by being actively involved” (Bernhard, 2010, p. 327).

Reyes & Torres (2007) employed a similar method to implement their family literacy project that enlists parents to be active participants in generating knowledge through discussion in order to identify the barriers to their involvement in the educational system. However, Reyes & Torres (2007) found through their review of literature that other family literacy practitioners failed to do the same and instead utilized a different model that was rooted in the deficit-thinking model of ‘fixing’ families.

It is believed that early childhood education programs, including family literacy programs, can bridge the achievement gap for children of low income families. According to recent trends, children with immigrant parents perform worse than their native-born peers, are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, and experience stress (Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Tienda & Haskins, 2011). However, studies have shown that immigrant children are more likely than their native-born peers to live with both parents, an arrangement that is considered to provide better outcomes. Unfortunately, if the immigrant parents are not proficient in the host country’s official language and/or are living with a precarious legal status, the benefits of a two parent family structure are null and void since it limits their earning capacity (Tienda & Haskins, 2011).

According to Tienda & Haskins (2011), children who grow up in homes where English is not spoken fall behind their native-born peers in reading and math, specifically if their parents have little education. Family literacy programs are also a promising approach in addressing this achievement gap as it can target immigrant families who would otherwise be linguistically isolated (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). These programs can assist immigrant families in learning to speak English and thus allow parents to

improve the language skills of their children. This strategy is intended to help children learn English and to help parents gain the language skills that are important for economic mobility, namely, increasing their ability to communicate with schools and teachers improves their children's academic outcomes and overall family well-being.

Research is showing the difference that well qualified teachers in early care and education settings can have on child and family outcomes (Winter & Kelley, 2008). The literature claims that the success of a family literacy program is dependent on the family literacy service provider (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Swick, 2009; Timmons, 2008). Timmons (2008) states that while working with families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds can be challenging, it is imperative that family literacy service providers are knowledgeable and sensitive to the families with whom they are working with. Timmons (2008) argues that in order for a family literacy program to be effective and produce positive outcomes, a family literacy service provider must provide families with suggestions and ideas of activities that can easily be implemented at home and families consider useful such as talking and reading about child rearing concerns and community life problems.

Doyle & Zhang (2011) documented parents' experiences as participants in a family literacy program and examined motivation to participate, expectations of the program, and valuation of the program. Doyle & Zhang (2011) created a focus group to discuss parents' motivations for participating in the program and found that many of them appreciated the family literacy practitioner's ability to take into consideration the knowledge that many parents brought with them. As well, the parents felt valued and respected in the family literacy centre environment and appreciated that they were not being judged by the practitioner or other parents.



Many studies have examined how early care and education can counteract problems children experiencing poverty and immigration face such as low family income, poor parental education, and language barriers (Ali, 2008; Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tienda & Haskins, 2011). A substantial body of research has indicated that parents' involvement in their children's education is significantly related to their child's academic success, in particular to their child's reading achievement (Noble, Duch, Darvique, Grundleger, Rodriguez, & Landers, 2011). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007), one of the goals of the PFLC is to improve academic outcomes for children and to narrow the achievement gap by connecting and building relationships with parents and caregivers and engaging them in the learning. The role of the Parent Worker in a PFLC is to help parents or caregivers understand the school system by modelling ways in which the parent or caregiver might approach a teacher or principal to discuss an issue as well as encourage parents to attend parent-teacher interviews and share information about their child (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **Approach and Rationale**

The purpose of this research was to understand the various ways in which a PFLC supports families in relation to the identified needs that arise from immigration and poverty. The data collected for this research was part of a larger study exploring what parents perceive as key supports and outcomes from participation in early years programs, specifically PFLCs which are situated in schools and operated by school boards. This study uses methodology developed in a previous study that examined parent perspectives in three Ontario communities (Underwood, Killoran & Webster, 2010). This project is a qualitative study using focus groups as the method of data collection. The current analysis used the qualitative data gathered from the focus groups.

### **Participants**

Sixty-three parents and/or family members participated in focus groups. The participants were parents and/or family members (46 mothers, 5 fathers, 9 grandmothers, 2 grandfathers, and 1 foster parent) who were accessing services at the Parenting & Family Literacy Centres from 2 school boards. The parents and family members were recruited by advertisements (flyers) posted at the twelve Parenting & Family Literacy Centre sites. Parents and family members were also invited verbally by staff and were informed that participation was voluntary.

### **Procedure**

Focus groups were conducted at each of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre sites in a room separate from where staff provided childcare. The focus groups had an average of 5 participants per site and lasted approximately 1 to 2 hours. Consent forms were provided to the participants to ensure that the requirements for ethics were fulfilled.

## **Focus Groups**

When conducting the focus group, participants were provided with a printed version of the focus group's questions so that they could have the opportunity to read the questions beforehand. A space was provided to allow the participant to write down their response in case they felt uncomfortable discussing their response in a group setting. In addition, the focus groups were audio recorded and notes were taken to ensure accuracy of the discussion. According to Krueger & Casey (2000), there are five types of questions used in focus group interviews; open questions, introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, and ending questions. Opening questions are used to get people talking and feeling comfortable. Introductory questions are used to get the group to start thinking about the topic at hand and help to direct the conversation. Transition questions provide a link between the introductory questions and the key questions and typically ask participants to go into more depth than introductory questions. Key questions, where the majority of the discussion time is devoted, focus on the greatest areas of concern. Lastly, ending questions bring the session to close. An example of the questions asked in the focus groups and will be described in the following section.

## **Focus Group Protocol**

The principal investigator gave parents a copy of the focus group questions and they were encouraged to write down responses if they felt uncomfortable speaking in the focus group. When the principal investigator began with the first question, she asked parents what were some helpful elements of the parenting and family literacy centres or other programs and services they access. She facilitated discussion by asking parents to think of a time when parents felt they needed support with a child and why they attended a PFLC. This usually helped participants generate responses and while some participants were initially quiet, they soon contributed to the discussion with the ongoing dialogue. The

majority of the time was spent on the first question and it was found that the remaining questions were usually answered with the first question.

As well, focus groups were managed using a nominal group technique (NGT) adapted from methodology designed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (1998). NGT was originally developed in the 1960s as a way to help groups to be efficient in decision making and has since been used in fields such as education and health (Harvey & Holmes, 2012). Ideas that emerged from the focus group discussions were recorded on index cards by the principal investigator while the research assistant collected field notes that included observations as well as comments made by participants that were not recorded on the index cards. Participants were then asked by the principal investigator to group these cards into themes. With the use of NGT, parents and family members not only had the opportunity to act as participants but also as analysts. This method ensured that the voice of the parents was accurately conveyed by using the labels created by the parents themselves in the focus groups.

### *Focus Group Questions*

Question 1: In your experience, what were the most helpful elements of the parenting and family literacy centre (or other supports and services that you use)?

Question 2: Have you had information from PFLCs about developmental screening or information about developmental milestones and has it supported you and/or your child?

Question 3: Describe any examples where you have seen evidence of PFLCs working with other supports and services in the community.

Question 4: What do you want from early years (0-6) supports and services in the future?

It is common for researchers to use two techniques throughout the focus group interview to elicit responses from participants who may be reluctant to contribute to the discussion – the pause and the probe (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The pause is basically a moment of silence after the question is asked that is typically five seconds or so and proves to be successful in eliciting a response from the group. The probe is a question or statement which encourages group members to add to or elaborate on something which was said, such as; how so? (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The facilitator, used probes such as; ‘could you explain?’ and ‘how do you mean?’ As participants spoke, the facilitator also used active listening techniques such as a forward lean, head nodding, or short verbal responses, like “go on,” to let participants know that their contributions are welcome.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. It is believed that thematic analysis is an ideal method to analyze qualitative data because of its flexibility to elicit themes from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With the use of thematic analysis, researchers are allowed to form and depict common themes across the data and derive meaning in order to understand the phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006). LeCompte (2000) states that it is helpful to think about analysis as a jigsaw puzzle that must be put together in order to portray a whole picture. People have various ways and techniques they employ to assemble a jigsaw puzzle such as gathering all of the similar pieces together, linking those pieces together into chunks, and finally identifying the missing pieces that can link the larger chunks together. LeCompte (2000) claims that even though one can piece together the puzzle using their strategies, it can still be difficult to see a whole portrait and really know the true meaning of the portrait. This is very much like qualitative research where the researcher is required to interpret the data to convey an accurate description of the phenomena. Researchers must then create a structure in which to analyze the data (LeCompte, 2000).

The strategy employed in the analysis of this study started with the process of becoming familiar with the data which began in the field during data collection. The researcher had the privilege of working on the project as a research assistant, was present during most of the focus groups and took field notes and memos for the principal investigator. While the parent and/or family members participated in the focus groups, the researcher took notes regarding observations that were made, as well as additional comments that were made but not recorded on the index cards. The researcher then transcribed the field notes shortly after each focus group to ensure accuracy. The entire data set which consisted of field notes and audio transcriptions from the focus groups were re-read carefully as part of the analytic process to recall the dialogue that took place. When organizing the data, the researcher arranged the field notes, memos, and audio transcripts into electronic files according to chronological order. The researcher then coded items that were relevant to poverty and immigration.

Saldaña (2009) states that “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 3). The researcher used what Saldaña (2009) refers to as “in vivo coding”, which are words used by participants to highlight and respect the participant’s voice. Using the codes generated by the participants ensured that the exact words, ideas, and views from the participants were accurately represented. As well, the use of in vivo coding allowed the researcher to interpret the terms the participants used rather than create new terms derived by academics or professional practice (Saldaña, 2007).

Following the initial review of in vivo codes, the researcher then revised the coding structure by examining those themes that had a direct reference to experiences of poverty and immigration in the data. Finally, the researcher used an online program called Wisemapping ® to organize and display the codes into concepts in a visual manner. Wisemapping ® is an online tool that allows you to create mind

maps/diagrams in order “to generate, visualize, structure and classify ideas, and as an aid in study, organization, problem solving, and decision making” (Wisemapping ®).

This study explored how a PFLC is able to meet the needs parents identify in this study that result from poverty and immigration. Three themes emerged from the analyses which warrant further investigation: (a) Socialization; (b) Resources; and (c) Environment.

### **Trustworthiness**

It is believed that trustworthiness in qualitative research may be difficult to establish as it is often challenged by positivists due to the fact that the notions of validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same manner (Morrow, 2005; Nutt Williams & Morrow, 2009; Shenton, 2004). Researchers have provided various procedures in which to establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies. According to Shenton (2004), there are four criteria that researchers should abide by: credibility, transferability, dependability, & confirmability. Trustworthiness for this research was established in a variety of ways through the collection of data which included researcher field notes, audio recordings, and transcripts of the focus groups. The following sections will discuss in detail how the researcher met the criteria proposed by Shenton (2004).

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness and ensures that the researcher has accurately conveyed the phenomena under scrutiny (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) states that in order to show credibility, the researcher should employ research methods that are well established. Because the data collected for this research was part of a larger study exploring what parents perceive as key supports and outcomes from participation in a PFLC, the researcher was able to establish credibility

by working alongside the facilitator who is experienced in conducting research and has employed the research methods in previous studies.

Shenton (2004) also states that it is important to develop a “familiarity with the culture of participating organizations” (p. 65). As previously stated, the facilitator of this project was diligent in building a relationship with the managers of the PFLCs by having meetings with them and maintaining an open communication with them as well in order to develop a relationship of trust as well as an understanding of the organization’s functions. The facilitator shared all relevant information of the project with the researcher and the researcher had the privilege of attending a meeting and collecting data in the majority (10 out of 12) of the focus groups.

In addition, the researcher had many meetings with the facilitator of the project for the purpose of debriefing. Shenton (2004) claims that ‘frequent debriefing sessions’ is important in establishing credibility because it allows the researcher to gain a clearer understanding of the project through dialogue of shared experiences. The researcher worked with the facilitator before collecting data, throughout the data collection process, immediately following a focus group, and while writing this research. The expertise of the facilitator along with the meetings were helpful to the researcher as it allowed her to clarify some misconceptions as well as become aware of her own biases and how these biases may have surfaced throughout this study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to how the findings of one study can be applied to other circumstances (Shenton, 2004). It is argued that in qualitative research, transferability is difficult to establish as qualitative research tends to focus on very specific environments and people (Shenton, 2004). It is also



argued that in order to establish transferability, the researcher must provide enough information about the context of the scenarios so that the reader is able to make such a transfer.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the integrity of the data and can be established when the researcher explicitly states the methods used in a study allowing for replication of the study (Nutt Williams & Morrow, 2009). In order to ensure that dependability has been established, the work must be repeated using the same participants, same environment, and same methods, resulting in similar findings. Dependability can be achieved when a researcher describes with full detail the methods in which data was collected so that a future researcher can repeat the work (Shenton, 2004). The three areas that Shenton (2004) claims to be important for establishing dependability are the research design, data collection and reflecting on the process, all of which the current study presents.

### **Confirmability**

According to Shenton (2004), confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to acknowledge any biases they may have at the onset of the research. This is important to establish in order to ensure that the participants' ideas, views, and experiences are accurately portrayed rather than the researcher's. In the present study, this was established when the researcher discussed their own perspective and background and presented her own predispositions.

## Chapter 4: Findings

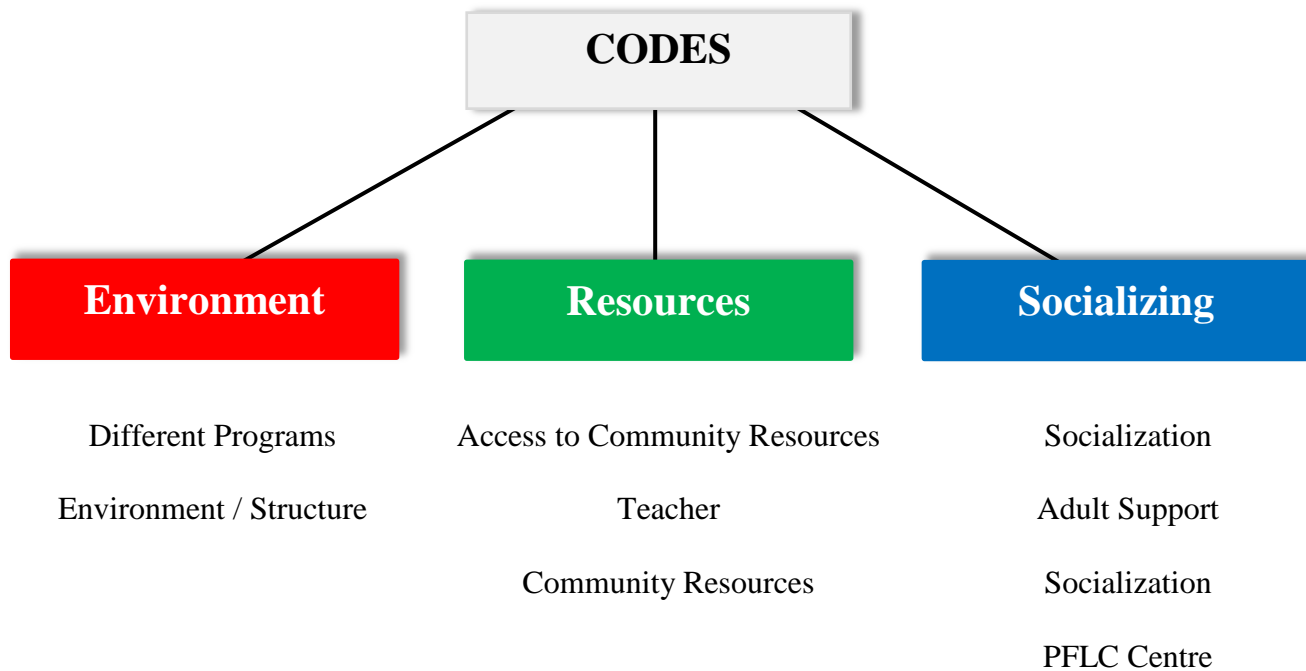
The purpose of this research was to understand the various ways in which a PFLC can support families in relation to needs parents describe as arising from poverty and immigration. The process of data analysis was conducted in an inductive manner while considering the researcher's question. Three main themes emerged throughout data analysis that can be related to immigration and income disparity: (1) Environment; (2) Resources; and (3) Socializing. These three themes are discussed in the subsequent section along with quotes from three different data sources that help to support these themes. The quotes that are represented were selected by adopting a lens of immigration and poverty, based on what the literature said. Any identifying information has been replaced with pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

### Coding Structure

The coding began with multiple readings of the transcribed data while reviewing for references to poverty and immigration. It should be mentioned that because the researcher had the privilege of working on the project with the principal investigator, a familiarity with the data was already established but even so, multiple readings were needed. First, the researcher read and coded the field notes and index cards and selected the index cards with a direct link to poverty and immigration that the focus groups had labelled themselves. These were described in Chapter 4 as in-vivo codes. The researcher read and coded the data a second time in order to ensure that relevant information was not missed. With the use of an online program called Wisemapping<sup>®</sup>, the researcher was able to visually display and organize the data.

The in-vivo codes that had a direct link to immigration and poverty are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1 below. Figure 1 presents the coding structure that was gleaned from the themes identified by participants when they grouped the index cards. The main headings in colour are themes that the researcher labelled and below those themes are the codes labelled by the participants themselves. Table 1 shows the items within each theme that relate to poverty and immigration. The codes in colour, listed

below the researcher's three main themes are those that were identified by participants. Following the coding structure, the three themes identified by the researcher in her analysis are supported with quotes from the transcribed focus group data.



*Figure 1.* Three major themes (researcher identified) grouping participant themes related to immigration and poverty.

Table 1 *Index card codes for each thematic category identified by participants.*

Environment	Resources	Socializing
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Different Programs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daycare-multicultural</li> <li>• Health Centre-different activities, diverse culture and adults</li> <li>• PFLC-staff treated parents like they need help, felt like they treated you like you were on assistance</li> <li>• PFLC in public school- totally different, not as bright and welcoming</li> <li>• Parents would not send child to the school at other PFLC</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Environment/Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distraction from stress</li> <li>• Mother is doing many things for immigration-a break at PFLC</li> <li>• PFLCs have parents who have the same financial situation.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Access to Community Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher helpful-especially for new immigrants e.g., translation</li> <li>• Helps with stresses:</li> <li>• CAS – Teacher helps with these (give information to parents)</li> <li>• With food guide</li> <li>• Food banks</li> <li>• Services in Hamilton</li> <li>• Red Cross</li> <li>• Teacher helped with apartment</li> <li>• Access to food banks</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Teacher</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher is concerned about children.</li> <li>• Pamphlets in her office re:</li> <li>• Dentist</li> <li>• Translation</li> <li>• Eye glasses – reduced or cheaper</li> <li>• Help with apartment</li> <li>• Medicine</li> <li>• Doctor – know of what different doctors – specialized</li> <li>• You feel valued</li> <li>• Teacher is nice- personality-has a big heart</li> <li>• Follows up on issues from months in the past</li> <li>• Concerned about the children and the parents/families</li> <li>• Knowledge is extensive in parenting skills</li> <li>• Language-daughter learned English</li> <li>• The PFLC helps her learn English</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Socialization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mom comes because son likes to see other kids and learns English for her and son. She feels like she does learn English</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Adult Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn English</li> <li>• Other parents support each other-build trust with other adults</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Socialization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mother learning English</li> <li>• English as a second language</li> <li>• Making new friends-parents</li> <li>• Use friends to help when you are not happy or are having a problem</li> <li>• PFLC made children happy to be in Canada</li> <li>• The centre is culturally mixed</li> <li>• Certain centres are racially or culturally or religiously dominated:</li> <li>• Affects the program</li> <li>• Example: centre in a more Muslim area</li> <li>• PFLC – is extremely diverse</li> <li>• This centre celebrates every holiday</li> <li>• Teacher celebrates every religious holiday – for all</li> <li>• Share each other’s food and traditions of the holiday</li> </ul>

**Community Resources**

- Breakfast clubs
- North end community health centre
- After school program for kids who wouldn't have anything to do otherwise

**PFLC Centre**

- At other programs you don't have parent interaction
- Other parents at other centres are stuck up
- In some centres, you feel like a speck of dirt
- One mom comes here because of the people. They make her feel comfortable
- Other centres have a clique- PFLCs are inclusive, welcoming
- At other centres, every parent is an island and works on their own. Here everyone works together.

## **Transcript data**

Each of the themes identified in Figure 1 are presented here using transcript data. The transcript data reveals what participants identified as needs related to poverty and immigration and how they felt their needs were supported. Each theme provides examples of parents' experiences of their participation in a PFLC. This information is helpful in understanding how to best support the needs of families experiencing immigration and poverty.

## **Environment**

The environment in which the PFLCs were located was mentioned in 9 out of 12 focus groups. Of these 9 focus groups, the dialogue from two focus groups was specific to poverty and immigration. It was determined that certain characteristics of the environment were deemed to be important such as the way staff made the parents feel, the way other parents at the PFLC made them feel, and the support they received at PFLCs. These experiences are influenced by the parents' socio-economic and immigration status as described in the literature presented in Chapter 1.

When discussing the role of the staff in making parents feel welcomed, parents discussed how crucial those first few days of attendance are "If you don't feel welcome then you're not gonna come back" (Field Notes, Focus Group 12). In the following example of a focus group, some parents expressed their preference for one centre over another and attributed this to how the centre/environment made them feel. The discussion begins with a parent sharing how a negative experience caused by the way she was made to feel and how this experience discouraged her from enrolling her child in the same school

Parent 1 (P1): Now Bob<sup>1</sup> and I have been to the other centre and we went twice and would not recommend it to anyone.

Parent 2 and Parent 3: Why?

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

P5: Yeah Why?

P6: It's totally different than this one.

P3: Yeah, totally different. The classroom is not as bright and as welcoming to the child as it is here. I mean, our teacher, she actually cares about the kids. She actually cares about the parents. She wants to know, the staff was...they treated you like you needed actual literacy help.

P2: So they talk to you like you're a second class citizen?

P3: I know. English isn't your first language and well here's a book for you to read, you know. I can read "See, Spot, Run"

Researcher (R): So you felt like they were talking down to you?

P3: And they treated you like you were on assistance when you are not. It didn't matter. The people who came in who were dressed up nicer would get treated differently. I just wore jeans and a t-shirt. It was different and it was definitely stereotypical, a lot of it and it made us actually consider leaving. It actually made us consider leaving [this neighbourhood]. If we weren't getting accepted to this school, we were moving.

R: Really? So you would not want your child to attend the school because of that experience?

P3: Yep, no

P4: No. We were not going to sign him up.

P3: I wouldn't send my worst enemy's child there (Focus Group 5)

It should be noted that within the above discussion, the principal investigator needed to ask questions that may be perceived as leading or guiding questions. The purpose of such questions is necessary in order to clarify the parents' ideas and record them as accurately as possible.

Some parents perceived that the treatment they received was negative due to their financial circumstances and because of this perception, parents felt intimidated and insecure.

I think that financially it also affects all the centres in the city. You do end up, you go into a lot of them, my reflection is on those centres, there are a lot more... they have more money. People that go to those ones seem to have...they're better off so you go in and you feel a little bit intimidated because they just seem to be... you don't seem to be in their class, do you understand what I'm saying? And so you feel... you feel a little bit intimidated (Focus Group7)

Where when I went to the other one, you felt like you were this speck of dirt on the ground on like the first day and you're like, what did I do? Did I do something? Do I smell? What? (Focus Group 9)

It became evident that parents valued an environment that was welcoming and free of judgment. As previously discussed, parents want the opportunity to socialize with one another and sometimes the environment can act as a barrier for this. Parents often compared the PFLC to other programs:

P2: I found too when I went there, I didn't go regularly so I didn't really know anybody but I found that maybe it was because there was nobody that was in the same situation as me where it was like you never really bonded with anybody or anything like that. But I did find when I went there you'd check in with the person at the desk or whatever and there is no real interaction with the person. Like they don't guide you or show you like when someone new comes into our room, show them where everything is and like and explain the day to them where I felt more like if I was to go to that centre it was sort of like you go there and they just leave you to your own devices, which is fine but it just didn't give me the same sort of welcome. (Focus Group 5)

Parents expressed how difficult it was to relax and enjoy their children in centres where the environment was not welcoming as they were made to feel stressed. In certain situations, parents felt as if they were constantly being watched which compounded the overall feeling of being judged. In the following scenario, a mother depicts how an environment, and the people within it, made her feel uncomfortable. This scenario is relevant to this study because as the literature states, families experiencing poverty and immigration should feel a sense of belonging in their surroundings (Kazemipur, 2006).

So here we go in and it's free play and then story time and things like that so the child's get used to doing something in a straight forward manner. Whereas there (a different centre), they're kind of just... I don't find them as open to helping you. And it's what I mean, it's not coming out the way I want it to come out but, being in the other centre, you feel watched almost- you understand what I'm saying? You kind of feel watched. Why am I being watched by a whole bunch of social workers? And I can't pair up my child the way I want to pair up my child because I don't know what this social worker has, what ideas she has in parenting because basically it comes down to a lot of the social workers, it comes down to their parenting skills may be different than mine and they don't agree with mine so they throw a red flag out and then it may be that my parenting skills may be fine but it can be quite stressful having... and even just a phone call to come to your home about your parenting skills, right? Whereas here you're not being watched you're being interacted with. So, you understand? (Focus Group 7)



When discussing the support parents felt from attending a PFLC, the staff was considered as part of the environment and it was often the reason why parents continued or discontinued going to certain centres. As the literature states, families experiencing poverty or immigration benefit from having the support of others and feeling welcomed (Ali, 2008; Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). One parent describes an experience she had:

Most importantly for me why I come here, I don't feel like I'm just a person who uses the services and I'm on my own like these are all the resources you can use in this room go to it, but you're on your own. I don't feel that way here I feel like that's how I feel when I go to other centres, like every mother is its own little island and nobody really connects with one another, nobody really talks. You get the polite "Hi" here and there but it's pretty much like leave me alone kind of feeling you know what I mean? (Focus Group 9)

Parents expressed that it was the staff's ability to form relationships with them that was crucial to their attendance in a PFLC. The literature states that when family literacy educators are working with families experiencing poverty or immigration, it is important to build a relationship of trust and respect so families feel valued and not judged. The staff's role proved to be important in the development of a culturally inclusive environment. Parents at various centres shared that this was something they valued and deemed important. (Focus Group 7)

P1: The other teachers... they don't do that type of thing. This teacher will celebrate every religious holiday, so we just celebrated ...

R: a Muslim holiday?

P1: yes, we did ...

P2: Eid.

P1: Eid, thank you. So we celebrated Eid but then we also celebrated Christmas and everybody came and celebrated, we all had food, we all you know, so we shared our food, and their food and we all learn from it, when we did Eid we did the ...

P2: Henna.

P1: Henna and you know all of the ...

P2: and the teacher is, you know, everything is like this, someday they do that ...

P1: so it's much more comfortable I here than any of the other ones I've been to ...

P3: it's much friendlier, cause everybody is family ...

P1: yah everybody ...

P3: yah and like everybody knows everybody, sometimes if you have problem you can share with them

A different parent made mention of the fact that all PFLCs that she has attended have all done the same.

I have been to two different centres, and both of them, they're great. Both the teachers are very interactive, they ask a lot of questions they are also really great with the other school because they have a lot of different nationalities. She did a great job with you know, incorporating a lot of their traditions like the talking about it and you know she had the poster where it said hello in all the different languages. It's so important but I think too that the supervisor at the family and literacy centres do a very good job too. To do what they need to get done and I do agree without having the other staff in the classroom it probably helps a little bit and socializing right. (Focus Group 8)

## **Resources**

Accessibility to resources was a theme that emerged in 10 out of 12 focus groups as most families believed that it was important for PFLCs to have an awareness of community resources. Of this number, direct links to immigration and poverty were made in three focus groups. This theme is relevant to this study because accessibility to resources is important for families experiencing poverty as well as newcomer families. While most families were pleased about the availability of services provided to families within the PFLC, many also expressed how prior to coming to a PFLC, they were lost. A mother who is a new immigrant said how wonderful the programs were in Canada compared to her home country because centres like the PFLC do not exist there. When asked if her previous experience in her home country has affected her ability to find centres like the PFLC. She responded:

Yah like because I didn't know that's what I'm saying like I didn't know that (PFLC's existed). But Canada is all the immigrants you know cause there's so many immigrants so nobody knows they don't teach that in hospital. Cause you take your baby to the doctors and they should be giving you that information cause everything is kinda overwhelming in the hospital but at least you're one on one with the doctor but it depends on the doctor. (Focus Group 4)

When asked why parents chose a Parent and Family Literacy Centre, some parents cited that they chose a PFLC because it is of no cost to them (Field Notes, Focus Group 5). In addition, parents stated that some programs were not as accessible as the PFLC since it required them to “to take a bus or go downtown” because the city has closed down the local library (field notes, focus group 5). When discussing how best to improve community services in the future, one parent shared her thoughts on the matter as it involved a person she knew:

P1: So I think that people, who live below the poverty line, especially, would define their community as being smaller than someone who is more affluent. Because if you're relying on public transit to access the programs that you need that really limits you; like if it's something that you need to be able to walk to or to find easily by only taking one bus to it that's a lot different than having to take three buses to get up to something that's way on the west end, right? So, when I think about my community I am pretty focused on our neighbourhood. I do have a vehicle but I don't always have access to it. I share it with my husband so if I need to take my kid to some special program, if you know, if we had some special needs and I needed to drive there that wouldn't always be possible, so that wouldn't be accessible to me so I wouldn't consider that to be in my community because I can't get to it easily, right? (Focus Group 12).

Most parents expressed pleasure in knowing that PFLCs were able to provide resources, such as screening tools, regarding their children's specific needs as it has allowed them to learn more about their children's development. However, while parents were content with the services provided by the PFLC, they described how frustrating it was for their children when they entered the school system since services like speech therapy were being “cut off” (field notes, focus group 5). Because parents do not have the means to pay for private speech therapy, they were left with fewer choices. One mother's statement highlights the point:

There's been cutbacks towards school and there's no real funding for these programs. If I need to speak to my speech pathologist, it may run into the hundreds of dollars per hour. And for me that's not a feasible amount of money. I mean I love my son, he is worth it but I can't be... I mean it's food or a speech path. You know what I mean? (Focus Group 5)

The following statement highlights the connection between immigration and poverty. When parents were asked why they chose a PFLC over other programs in their city, many stated that it was because of the resources that were available. One parent spoke very candidly about the challenges her family faced when moving to Canada and felt that the inability to speak English was a barrier in her and her husband's quest for a better life and considered this to be of utmost importance. The following is her response:

R: Okay so when you think about all of the programs that you've attended, so when you look at this checklist and all of the services that you get in this community including this one what do you think is helpful about these programs? What is supportive?

P: Language.

R: Language, for whom?

P: To me and to my daughter, learn now my daughter, many things here in English. And small daughter learn here, and many language English. Here.

P: And there my husband in the house, he don't know much understand. I understand how you can listen to learn from the school, yeah I learn cause he don't understand don't speak English any word my husband...

R: Your husband doesn't speak any English?

P: Any word. Now he learn, you know he's old 44...now began, speak a few... cause we wants works, cause excuse me just another thing about the money give us it's not... it's a few, we get a house a ticket now, a \$400 ticket a month \$400 and \$100 about immigration give us this year about the apartment and take this and take you know the telephone, apartment, electric, many things we don't have money in that ... (Focus Group 7)

The staff as a resource is linked to poverty and immigration in three focus groups. Parents mentioned that the staff was an integral part of the positive experience they had in a PFLC and considered the staff to be a resource. The following conversation highlights these points:

P1: She helps you for access for a lot of the newcomers if they have trouble accessing or knowing what is accessible to them so she has like in her office she has tons of pamphlets, every single thing you can think of for her to help and also ...

R: So what kinds of things, when you say, can you give me an example of something she might have helped somebody with?

P1: She knows the access to the services in this community, she knows a lot of, and it's easy to get to them through her, not necessarily like she's not making the phone call but she gives you the information to get to those types of things or the phone numbers whatever the case may be yah.

R: And you also talked before about financial support.

P1: Yes.

R: Is that important too?

P1: Yeah our community can be quite run down sometimes for sure. Not necessarily from each centre like you know ... (Focus Group 7)

The teacher was helpful in assisting parents with issues relating to immigration and was able to lead them in the right direction.

P2: When I come here I have a problem about, with immigration, about the visa, we come here, immigration take from my daughter visa, yah and some problem and then I back we call him it's the visa you take from us the visa. At that time I speak with teacher and come and speak with another person to come and help me, I have somebody to help you.

P2: So now don't I'm giving all the information come back to me. No wants the visa or the want the card from the doctor from your country, my country don't give me a card to doctor all we have card to drive. We don't drive and that time to now we don't have it don't help us want the visa, and the visa we take from my country. So now we don't know what we can do. (Focus Group 7)

## **Socializing**

In every focus group, parents indicated the importance of having the opportunity to socialize with other parents/adults. In four focus groups, the topic of socialization can be directly linked to poverty and immigration. While families expressed that socializing was essential for a child's development, families

specified that it was of utmost importance to have opportunities to socialize with one another. When asked why parents chose to attend a PFLC, many families commented on specific components of the program like support of other parents, shared knowledge and experience from other parents, and having a feeling or sense of community. These topics can be linked to life circumstances such as immigration and income disparity. For example, when parents were asked why they attended the PFLC and what about the PFLC they found helpful, one mother who was a newcomer to Canada discussed the challenges she encountered when arriving to Canada was building a social network. She found that her participation in a PFLC was beneficial. She responded:

I found friends, not everybody. When you are not happy, not sad, when you have any problems you come here and that time you not remember that problem too cause you are happy here. Cause when you are here, you are new here-the same stress, same stress, you don't know anything here. So it's much more comfortable here than any of the other ones...it's much friendly, cause everybody family. Sometimes if you have problem you can share with them. (Focus Group 7)

New immigrants chose to attend a PFLC for their children to socialize and also so they can learn how to speak English. In one focus group a new immigrant mother who had only been in Canada for three months at the time of this study indicated her reasons through a fellow parent who speaks the same language.

R: Can you ask her why she comes?

P1: Because her son, to socialize and learn, learn English.

R: Can you ask, as a person new to Canada, can you ask about this program? If there is anything about this program, she thinks, that is positive maybe in comparison to her experience before she came to Canada? Is this is similar or different?

P1: Yeah she said it's good for kids like everything here good. In our country we don't have this, you know? It's new for us. Yes, good. All this stuff is good like this playground. We don't have this new playground (Focus Group 3)

One immigrant parent discussed how her participation in a PFLC was positive and therefore helped her young daughter adjust to life in Canada (Focus Group 7).

P2: My daughter on the first time she wants to come back to my country, wants to go back to my country ...

P1: She wants to go home ...

P2: Yeah, but now no...

P1: She wants to stay here ...

P2: Stay here. We are happy here, we don't want go ...

P1: That's nice...

R: And you think it's because of this (PFLC)?

P2: Yeah, when the children stay alone not happy maybe have not like here- games, some games and other children/friends to play with them and when they come here play with them happy.

R: Okay.

### **Summary of Findings**

The research question that guided this study sought to understand the needs that parents identified as resulting from immigration and poverty and the purpose of this study was to explore how a PFLC provides support to these families. Through an analysis of data that consisted of transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings, the researcher found three major themes that emerged: 1) Environment, 2) Resources, and 3) Socializing. These three themes emerged from the focus group data as the parents' descriptions of the needs of families experiencing poverty and immigration. The following section will discuss the findings in more detail in order to understand how PFLCs help families experiencing poverty and immigration.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Poverty and immigration are two experiences that have an effect on the degree of support that parents receive for their role in children's development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It can be assumed that families living in poverty, including those who are newly immigrated, may have fewer family supports for a number of reasons including lack of financial means to access services, employment instability, and stresses related to food, housing, and other basic needs. It is important to clarify that not all immigrants live in poverty and not all families living in poverty are immigrants. Community supports can address some of these stressors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Kazemipur, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Yau, 2010).

This study examined one program that is designed to support parents and families who live in low income and high immigration neighbourhoods called Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs). An informal assessment of needs was made to determine what parents identified as needs relating to immigration and poverty and how a PFLC can best support these families. The research question was: What are the needs that parents identify as resulting from poverty and immigration and which supports do they receive from Parenting and Family Literacy Centres? The findings represent the parents' responses from their participation in the focus group. Parents' own codes and transcript data were analyzed in order to determine what their needs were and how a PFLC can best support these parents. The data indicated that three themes are related to immigration and poverty: Environment, Resources, and Socializing. These themes are what parents identified as areas where educators from PFLCs can best support them. A discussion section will follow and address the findings and the connection to the existing literature.



## **Connecting themes to literature**

### **Environment**

The topic of environment appeared to be the most discussed amongst parents, in particular, the power that an environment has on making parents feel welcome or unwelcome. As mentioned by Barone (2011), family literacy programs have the potential to engage parents in working with their children by building trust and establishing a comfortable environment. It was found that parents were more responsive to efforts made by facilitators/educators when an approach that focused on families' strengths rather than deficits was taken. The literature also claims that the success of a family literacy program relies on the family literacy service provider (Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Swick, 2009; Timmons, 2008). Timmons (2008) maintains that while working with families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds can be challenging, it is imperative that family literacy service providers are knowledgeable and sensitive to the families with whom they are working with. Ali (2008) echoes this sentiment and states that family service providers must have an awareness of the families they work with as they have the ability to make a positive impact on these families, especially newcomer families and those experiencing poverty. Among such knowledge, family service providers should know the circumstances under which newcomer families migrated as well as the human and cultural capital they bring with them in order to meet their needs and make the settlement process a smooth transition (Ali, 2008; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Kazemipur, 2006; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Tienda & Haskins, 2011).

An examination of the data showed that some of these parents had had experiences where they felt judged by the staff, other parents, or both in community service settings. The participants expressed having been being excluded from a "clique" of other parents who were "better off financially" (Focus

Group 7) and claimed that they were made to feel “like a speck of dirt” (Focus Group 9). These parents had described feeling differently in PFLCs and for this reason had selected to come to these programs. The literature indicates that people who live in poverty are often aware of the ways in which they are marginalized and excluded from society for not belonging and it is apparent that some of the participants were made aware of the difference in socioeconomic status (Lewis, 1963).

In the above passage (Focus Group 7), the participant describes what Ali (2008) refers to as “the loss of parenting self-efficacy among immigrant parents” where she explains is a result of a new immigrant’s encounter with the new host country’s expectations of parenting. Many researchers have produced similar findings and found that new immigrant parent’s notions of ‘good parenting’ did not always coincide with the notions of the dominant culture and in fact are often very different (Ali, 2008; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Segal & Mayadas, 2005). When newcomer parents and educators/service professionals have differing views on parenting, tensions may arise that can ultimately affect the child as well as leave the parent feeling helpless. Parents identified the environment to be important when attending a PFLC and this can be interpreted as being a need. Educators can support families in their parenting role by creating an environment that is safe and welcoming and reflects the diversity of the families that the PFLC.

### **Resources**

Parents discussed the importance of having access to resources in a PFLC as well as the importance of the staff to be used as a resource herself. Families conveyed their level of comfort and trust in some centres and highlighted that it was because of how the staff in the PFLC made them feel. When trust and comfort was established with the staff, families were more willing to seek help from them. This fact is similar to a study conducted by Doyle & Zhang (2011) where they conducted focus groups with parents in a literacy centre to learn the reasons for participation in those programs. Doyle & Zhang (2011)

found that parents cited their appreciation for the literacy specialist/teacher as a main reason for participation because the literacy specialists treated the parents with respect and took into consideration their knowledge and experience. This seemed to be of significant value to the families who identified needs that related to immigration as well as poverty. As the literature states, many newcomer families often experience challenges when adapting to their new host country. These challenges include the desire to feel valued and respected by their community, lacking a sense of belonging, and having the ability to access social services and many researchers state these challenges to be a barrier to well-being (Ali, 2008; Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007).

Immigrant children and children living in poverty tend to have lower school performance outcomes due to their circumstances in life (Ali, 2008; Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; & Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A parent's ability to be engaged in their child's education is limited for a variety of reasons. These reasons include a parent's low literacy skills, their inability to speak the dominant culture's language, and their work schedule. The literature states that family literacy programs can be a promising approach in addressing this achievement gap as it can target immigrant families and those living in poverty (Barone, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Swick, 2009). These programs can assist immigrant families in learning to speak English, thus allowing parents to improve the language skills of their children, provide them with other resources such as information to food banks and shelters. As described in the findings chapter a mother noted that her attendance in a PFLC has helped her and her daughters to learn how to speak English, a skill that she valued as it would increase her family's ability to do well financially.

Parents identified that having resources and being able to access resources was a need and considered to be important for their well-being. Parents identified having access and information to food

banks, translation services for new immigrants, and assistance for new immigrants in navigating the system and services such as Children's Aid Society, Early Intervention, and specialized health services. Parents reported that the support they receive from educators in PFLCs has been key to having this need met. Parents identified the educator's sensitivity to their concerns and the educator's ability to follow up on sensitive matters to be one of the strongest supports they receive from a PFLC. In addition, parents valued the extensive knowledge educators in PFLCs had regarding specialized services available in the community and the fact that this information was made available to parents. Since a PFLC is intended to create a bridge between families and schools and serves the purpose of introducing families to schools, it is crucial that the educators working in PFLCs have an extensive knowledge of issues affecting families in their centres (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Also, it should be considered that PFLCs are placed in areas considered to have high needs that include poverty and as previously discussed, many new immigrants may experience poverty within the first few years of settlement. Therefore, educators working in a PFLC should consider the many ways in which they can help families by developing an awareness of issues such as poverty and immigration that affect the families in their centre.

### **Socializing**

Many parents across the focus groups made mention of the value they placed on having an outlet to socialize with other parents. Parents described how their participation in a PFLC provided them with a 'sense of belonging' (Focus Group 1) and 'community' (Focus Group5). The theme of socializing was also mentioned in the literature regarding poverty and immigration (Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008; Pérez). Immigrants and families who are experiencing poverty report feeling excluded from society and felt isolated (Ali, 2008; Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Segal &

Mayadas, 2005). These negative experiences can often lead to mental health problems due to the high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, ultimately affecting the well-being of their children. However, it is believed that mental health challenges can be alleviated with the help of social support and social networks as the benefits of such supports are vast (Kazemipur, 2006). In the case of immigrant parents, research states that many experience a decline in family supports and social networks when moving to their new host country and often experience depreciation in occupational status and income, for the sake of providing a better future for their children (Ali, 2008; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). As discussed in Ali's (2008) study, immigrant parents feel that the challenges in their role as parents has increased yet their ability to provide their families with the basic necessities has decreased. These challenges and obstacles left immigrant parents feeling a "loss of self-efficacy" that has been intensified by their encounters with Canadian institutions, which immigrant parents perceive to view them with a deficit lens (Ali, 2008; Bernhard, Goldring, Young, Berinstein, & Wilson, 2007; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Tienda & Haskins, 2011). However, many parents expressed gratitude for the opportunities to socialize and mentioned how this opportunity has provided them with a sense of community for their family. Parents described the need for opportunities to socialize and the PFLC has supported them with this need by providing a welcoming environment that is rich in resources and many opportunities to socialize.

### **Limitations**

While this research has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field of Early Childhood Education and understanding how parents would like to be best supported, it has its limitations. First, the topic of poverty and immigration are sensitive especially for families experiencing them. Families experiencing poverty and immigration are often marginalized and can be vulnerable. Therefore, it can be assumed that families in these situations are less likely to vocalize their concerns due

to the difference in power. This is a limitation because it can affect the data collected and research findings. Also, the participants from the focus groups were not solely from the researcher's population of interest, which means that the comments about immigration and poverty do not necessarily come from people with these experiences.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Parents experiencing poverty and immigration face many challenges when it comes to ensuring the well-being of their children. This study explored the ways in which a PFLC supported families experiencing these life circumstances and found three major themes that emerged from the data; socializing, resources and environment. Parents in the study deemed all three of these areas to be of importance when it came to their participation in a PFLC. It was determined by the researcher through data analysis that these three topics are intertwined. For example, parents mentioned the environment; feeling welcomed, having a sense of belonging, and community to be important and often cited that these were all necessary in order to ensure a return to the program. A major part of the environment was the educator in the room and how the educator acted as a facilitator as well as the knowledge the educator had regarding resources. Once the environment was perceived to be welcoming, parents were more likely to attend and access resources available which can be helpful for families experiencing poverty and immigration. Many parents considered the educator to be a resource as well due to their extensive knowledge of the community and services available for families. Information pertaining to food banks, shelters, and assistance for issues relating to immigration were reported to be beneficial for families who were unfamiliar with the system and therefore unable to navigate it. Families were more likely to socialize with one another if they felt comfortable in the environment and found the PFLC to be useful in providing resources. Parents spoke of situations in which they were depressed due to extenuating circumstances and spoke of how the social network that was established within the PFLC helped alleviate the isolation they felt as they felt happy to be there and distracted from what was going on in their lives.

These themes that emerged illustrate that a PFLC has the potential to support the needs of families experiencing poverty and immigration. The educators working in the PFLC, especially, have the ability to create an environment that is welcoming and supportive of the participants' needs.

## **Targeted vs Universal Program**

PFLCs are located in neighbourhoods that are deemed to be 'high needs' and programs are created specifically to target the families and children in these areas (Yau, 2010). The aim of the program is to guide parents and caregivers on how to engage in the school system in order to facilitate their children's transition into kindergarten. However, while PFLCs were designed with the intent to be targeted programs, they are open to every family in the community regardless of socioeconomic status. This leads the researcher to question whether or not a targeted program is beneficial to families experiencing poverty and immigration or if a universal program can address those needs as well. While the data indicated that there are some families experiencing poverty and immigration, the majority of families were there for reasons not related to poverty and immigration and benefitted just the same from their participation in a PFLC. Kazemipur (2006) indicated that immigrants limit their interaction with other communities due to the fact that they tend to rely more heavily on their own communities, decreasing their social networks. Kazemipur (2006) argues that the danger in having smaller social networks increases the likelihood of isolation and loneliness as there is very little emotional and social support in times of need. As well, smaller social networks can affect upward mobility since being part of a larger social network presents greater opportunity to access resources.

## **Recommendations**

In order to combat the effects of poverty in general and in new immigrants, I believe it is important to provide safe spaces in which immigrants and families experiencing poverty feel comfortable, welcomed, and not judged. A PFLC offers the perfect opportunity for positive interactions that encourage families experiencing poverty and immigration to encourage participation. By encouraging *all* families in a community to participate in a PFLC, educators can act as bridges between various cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds to interact with one another. This will ensure that immigrants and families



experiencing poverty expand their social networks and build social capital as it can have a huge impact on an individual's life affecting their chances of finding a job, ability to assist their children in their development and academic endeavours, and mental and physical health.

## Appendix A

### Parenting and Family Focus Group Consent Form

Dear Parents and Guardians:

#### **Thank you for coming today!**

We have invited you to come here to take part in a research study. Before you agree to volunteer in the focus group, please read through the following information about the study. Please ask as many questions as you need in order to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do. Childcare will be provided.

#### **Purpose of the focus groups:**

We are holding focus groups to ask parents about their experience with early years services including their experiences at Parenting and Family Literacy Centers. In the focus group you will be asked about:

- use of services
- satisfaction with services
- usefulness of the services
- access to services

We will conduct one focus group at each of the 12 Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. Last year, we conducted similar focus groups in other early years sites in two other communities in Ontario.

#### **What you need to know:**

- The study will collect information through a survey and a focus group. Please let us know if you have not filled in a survey and if you would like to do so. Information from the survey will be kept anonymous. There is a separate consent form for the survey.
- The information gathered from the surveys will be shared with the focus groups for the purpose of discussion. However, information about individuals will not be shared in the focus groups.
- The focus group will take about 2 hours. It will take place in a room where the group will not be overheard by other members of the community.
- None of the activities in this study are experimental. We are gathering information to understand parent and family perspectives better.
- In the focus group, we will ask questions related to your experience with early years services including the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with the questions or answers from other participants, you may leave the room and/or withdraw from the study.
- Your decision to take part in the study, or to answer any questions, will not affect your access to services in your community, or your relationship with Ryerson University, your city, or school boards.
- Information from the project will be shared with the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre service providers in your community. We also plan to publish our research in academic journals and may

be used in a Master's Research Paper (MRP). Your name or the names of any of your family members will not be shared.

- We ask that participants do not share information from other people in the group. We cannot guarantee that other people here will not share information from the focus group.
- The sharing of information from the study may be useful to policy makers, and local government. Letting these decision makers know about your experience is helpful for planning services.
- We cannot promise that you will receive any direct benefits from taking part in this study. But, many people are happy to have the experience of taking part in a study that has broad benefits to society.
- We will audio record the focus groups. We will take audio recordings back to our offices and transcribe (type) them. We will ask you to write down some of your ideas during the focus group. The written material will be kept as part of our data collection. The typed transcriptions and written material will be kept in offices at Ryerson University on password protected computers or in locked filing cabinets.
- All information and data, including audio-files, we have collected will be destroyed within two years of publishing the findings. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Kathryn Underwood (Principal Investigator)  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
Tel: 416-979-5000 ext. 2519  
Email: [kunderwood@ryerson.ca](mailto:kunderwood@ryerson.ca)

If you have questions about your rights as a human subject and taking part in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
Tel: 416-979-5042

**Agreement:**

Signing below shows that you have read the information about the study and have had a chance to ask questions. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to take part at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you are aware that this focus group will be audio recorded and transcriptions will be made. It also indicates that at any time during the focus group you may withdraw your consent. If this occurs your information will not be used in the final analysis and report. All other data collected from you will be destroyed.

You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Please check here if you agree to be audio-recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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