

Designing and Implementing School, Family, and Community Collaboration Programs in Quebec, Canada

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Abstract

The findings in this article will be presented in relation to developing and implementing processes of school, family, and community partnership programs in two primary and two secondary schools in Quebec from 2001 to 2005. The action research project was based on Epstein's (2001) comprehensive framework of six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. In keeping with Epstein's recommendations, an Action Team was formed in each school, and the starting points were identified. Action plans were developed and activities were assessed. Data reported here concern only those factors that assisted or challenged the development and the implementation of the school, family, and community collaboration programs.

Key Words: school-family-community partnerships programs, teams, collaboration, school change

Introduction

The school's mission is not to make a radical, short-term change in the social environment of its students; for this, it has neither the means nor the resources. Research recognizes, however, that the quality of family and community environments has a major impact on students' success (Henderson &

Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001; Nettles, 1991). The social and family environments are often depicted by many reformers as essential partners to school improvement plans. To this effect, research shows that the school can—even must—call upon the collaboration of these environments to fully achieve its mission (Epstein, 2001). But how can this be done? How can the family and community become partners and collaborators with the school? An action research project was undertaken within the context of a major educational reform, and the results are presented here to identify the facilitating and challenging conditions met while elaborating and implementing school, family, and community programs. The objectives of the project (2001-2004), which focused on intervention and research, were to (1) design, implement, and evaluate a program of collaboration between the school and families in the community relative to the educational reform project, and (2) pinpoint models of school-family-community collaboration that might be transferred to various environments. A follow-up was done in 2005 on two primary schools that were willing to pursue their collaborative work. The following article highlights elements addressing the development and the implementation processes. Assessments of the activities will be discussed in a subsequent paper. Our aim here is to pinpoint factors that helped or hindered the development and the implementation of school, family, and community collaboration programs.

Brief Review of the Literature

School-Family-Community Collaboration

Over the past decades, numerous researchers have documented the benefits and challenges associated with school, family, and community partnerships (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan et al., 2001; Sanders, 2001). In Québec, Canada, as in many other countries, the literature on school-family collaboration highlights the relationships between effective parental involvement and improved grades for children and adolescents, greater presence in school, better behaviors, higher adolescent autonomy, and higher academic aspirations (Deslandes, 1996; Deslandes, Bertrand, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997; Deslandes & Potvin, 1998; Deslandes, Potvin, & Leclerc, 2000; Deslandes & Royer, 1997). Quebec researchers have also documented the factors that influence the level of parental involvement in schooling (e.g., Deslandes, 2001a, 2005; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2001, 2004, 2005; Deslandes, Fournier, & Rousseau, 2005). A certain caution is advised regarding use of the concept of “partnerships.” The authors suggest the term “collaboration” be used instead, since it reflects a more realistic goal for Québec schools (e.g., Deslandes, 2001b). In a time of curricular reform, parental involvement is perceived as

an indispensable ingredient for the success of school reform (Swap, 1993). Indeed, studies have demonstrated the importance of integrating parents into the process of renewing school study programs. Two principles underlie the current reform based on socio-constructivism: the student is the main initiator of his/her learning, and the teacher is the guide, or mediator, in the student's learning (Dodd, 1998; Ministère de l'Éducation [MEQ], 1999; Shumow, 1997). Now, these ways of doing and learning differ from those many parents are familiar with (Deslandes & Lafortune, 2000; Dodd). Often, parents react negatively to these non-traditional practices since they do not understand the stakes involved in their children's learning (Dodd & Konzal, 1999). As for "school-community collaboration," this may take different forms. Programs most often mentioned include supporting students with scholarships or other forms of encouragement, tutoring, mentoring, and various activities related to the student's career plans (Nettles, 1991; Nettles & Robinson, 1998; Sanders, 2001). The community is defined as any individual or neighborhood that influences students' learning and development. It includes the neighborhood, community organizations, businesses, cultural groups, health services, recreational centers, municipalities, and universities (Epstein, 1996; Nettles; Nettles & Robinson; Sanders, 2001; Wentzel, 1999). The community comprises not only families with school-age children, but also all those interested in and concerned about the quality of education (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Epstein et al., 2002). To our knowledge, there was no action research project dealing with school, family, and community collaboration in Québec when the project began in 2001.

Challenges Associated with School-Family-Community Collaboration

Several authors report on the challenges to school-family-community collaboration (Epstein, 1986, 2001; Moles, 1999; Sanders, 1999). Moles, for example, identified five categories that concerned all the players—parents, teachers, and community members: (1) lack of time and resources, (2) cultural, language, and educational differences, (3) lack of outside support for collaboration on the part of employers, principals, and politicians, (4) a school organization that does not encourage school-family-community collaboration and uses traditional practices that are effective for only a certain number of families, and (5) lack of information and training relative to school-family-community collaboration. One of the most effective ways to meet these challenges involves teachers' strategies that aim to promote parental involvement and school-family collaboration programs (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). In fact, a large number of scientific writings have emphasized

the importance of developing an overall program of collaboration activities adapted to the needs identified for each school and targeted to as many families as possible, regardless of how diverse (Catsambis & Garland, 1997; Dauber & Epstein; Epstein et al., 1997). Thus, school practices influence family practices. Parents are more involved both at home and at school when they see that the school encourages their collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

The project was based on Epstein's (2001) comprehensive framework of six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. In keeping with experts' recommendations, we adhered to the following steps to success: (1) create an Action Team, (2) obtain funds and official support, (3) identify starting points, (4) write a one-year action plan, (5) evaluate implementation and results, and (6) continue working toward a comprehensive goal-oriented program of partnerships (Epstein et al., 2002). A participatory research action process was followed (Patton, 1990). The researcher, author of the current article, often accompanied by a colleague from the Ministry of Education, worked as an animator and a facilitator in the project. She had an active role in initiating the process, in analyzing data for the purposes of identifying the starting points, and in planning evaluation subsequent to designed activities.

Methods

School Selection

A few school principals known for their open-mindedness and interest in the project were invited to its presentation in June 2001. Two primary schools and two secondary schools agreed to take part starting in autumn 2001. However, one primary school withdrew during the autumn, alleging tensions among the teaching staff regarding wage equity. It was replaced by another in March 2002. The factors considered in choosing the schools included the volunteerism of administration members, staff members, parents, and community members, as well as the possibility of having access to a liaison agent. A few socio-demographic characteristics available for each school are given in Table 1. In Quebec, more and more schools develop programs of study that illustrate their specificity, such as arts and music, sports, or new technologies. Parents now have the possibility to send their children to the school of their choice as long as the school has places available to new students. School choice is more popular at the secondary level than at the lower grades.

Table 1. A Few Characteristics of the Selected Schools Gathered in 2001

Primary School 1 (PS1)
Primary school PS1 is located in an urban area. The building concerned has 16 classes of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students as well as a multi-program class. The number of students per class is very high. The socioeconomic level based on the MEQ's underprivileged environment index is rather high.
Primary School 2 (PS2)
Primary school PS2 is also located in an urban area. The school's 226 students include 107 girls and 119 boys. It is situated in an underprivileged area whose residents have a low level of schooling. There is little structure for children. Recently, a plant where many parents worked closed its doors, leading to the risk of reduced family income. Many single-parent families depend on outside support (CLSC or local community service center).
High School 1 (HS1)
Located in an underprivileged rural area, secondary school HS1 has 839 students; 40.4% of the mothers and 33% of parents have no diploma; 15.7% of the parents have no full-time job. The average annual income of the families as a whole is \$25,677 (U.S. Dollars).
High School 2 (HS2)
School HS2 is also located in a rural area. It includes 673 students, whose parents have an average income of \$18,693 (U.S. Dollars). The school's climate is deemed excellent by 87% of those responding to the survey on the educative project.

Team Structure

The school principal of each participating school nominated the members of the Action Teams. At the elementary level in 2001, teams included a school principal and a school principal assistant, a teacher, a parent, and a specialist teacher or a school psychologist. At the secondary level, the Action Team structure was much bigger and included both the school principal and the school principal assistant, 2 teachers, 2 parents, and 2 members of the non-teaching personnel.

Data Collection

To evaluate the process of designing the programs, semi-directed interviews were arranged. In-depth phone interviews with members of the four Action Teams were conducted after the first year of the project and again after the third (and final) year in order to evaluate the implementation of the program. Further on-site interviews were conducted a year later, in June 2005, with members of the two primary schools' Action Teams that had agreed to continue with the project. In addition to these interviews, the intervener-researcher regularly recorded her observations and reflections in writing in her log book.

Procedure and Discussion

After Year One of the Project

Interviews with Members of the Action Teams

Telephone interviews were conducted with 3 or 4 members (an assistant principal, a liaison agent, a parent, and a teacher representative and/or a non-teaching personnel representative) of each Action Team. The interviews were conducted by a graduate student who was first trained to do so. They lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were tape recorded. The interview protocol consisted of eight questions (see Table 2) designed to elicit information on the facilitating conditions and the challenges that were encountered during the first year of designing the program. The responses were recorded, then transcribed for purposes of analysis. Next, the semi-directed interviews as a whole were divided according to the statements given for each verbal intervention, and the statements were analyzed using the software *N'Vivo*. The nature of the statements were determined with the aid of a category system grouping the main elements of the interview plan. In this article, we focus on six categories that emerged from analyses of responses to questions 2 to 7: (1) confidence and satisfaction with the project, (2) exchanges with colleagues and with parents, (3) rhythm of work, (4) facilitating conditions, (5) challenges, and (6) future challenges. Schools will be referred to as PS1 (primary school 1), PS2 (primary school 2), HS1 (high school 1) and HS2 (high school 2). The intervener-researcher's observations and personal reflections were analyzed using the same categories. She visited each of the sites about seven times per year.

Table 2. Protocol of Telephone Interviews After Year One of the Project

1. How do you view your role within the SFC (school-family-community) Action Team?
2. Do you think the project will produce results? On what do you base your answer?
3. Do you discuss the project with your colleagues and with the parents?
4. Do you think it would have been possible to move faster with this year's activities? If so, how? If not, explain.
5. What do you think was the easiest thing we did this year? What was helpful?
6. What do you think was the hardest thing we did this year? What could the team do better?
7. What challenges do you see ahead? With your colleagues? With the community? With the parents?
8. Do you expect to meet with difficulties? If so, what steps would you take to surmount these difficulties?

Confidence and Satisfaction with the Project

Members of the Action Teams are confident the project will lead to positive results, for example: "...since it corresponds to the approach prepared in the school's action plan for the years 2001-2004" (PS1). "It's going to answer a need that parents articulate each year, one we really don't know how to meet concerning communication and the transmission of information"(HS2).

Exchanges with Colleagues and with Parents

The participants say they discuss it with colleagues, but not with parents: "With colleagues at work, yes. We even made an official presentation on the committee activities we're proposing for next year." "With the parents, no, not as such, except with parents who are on the school-family-community committee" (PS1). Others discuss the project with colleagues because it will soon be integrated into their school success plan. "We talked about the project to parents on the institutional council. We mentioned it in that leaflet that goes around, and talked about it a little in the school newspaper" (PS2). At the high school level, they do not discuss the project much with colleagues outside the Action Team: "Not really. We discuss it among ourselves, among the people on the committee, but not outside of that." (HS1).

Rhythm of Work

Most participants feel the project could not have moved any faster, since the school was experiencing too many changes at the same time (PS1): "The team that worked on the school-family-community project was already used to working together. So right off, we had a common vision of where we were headed with this project" (PS2). Others say that they feel it was impossible to move any faster, given they were starting from square one and had to learn concepts and acquire the necessary tools (HS2).

For the intervener-researcher, the time for designing the project varied a good deal from one school to another. In PS1, two members of the administration sat on the Action Team at the start. The decision by one to withdraw after declaring a lack of belief in the project made for a lighter atmosphere during meetings. The liaison agent was highly insecure regarding the project and insisted on a definition of her role along with a clear and well-defined procedure. PS2, on the other hand, didn't come on board until March. The liaison agent was a member of the administration who believed in the project. This administration had decided to integrate the school, family, and community collaboration aspect into the school's educative project for the following year. The working climate within the Action Team was excellent, and the project was developed with speed. In HS1, things got off to a very slow start. A liaison agent wasn't appointed until February 2002, and new members joined

in at each meeting. Here, too, tensions eased when one of the two members of the administration withdrew. There had been a sense of mistrust regarding the university researcher; the administration appeared suspicious of interference and wanted to know all the details of the procedure in advance. In HS2, the withdrawal of one member of the administration helped make the Action Team more effective, as the other member believed in the project and was very forthcoming. This member had presented the project to the management Action Team and the general assembly. He had excellent communication skills and contributed positively to the dynamic of the Action Team.

Facilitating Conditions

Conditions the participants found helpful involved team work, discussions during meetings, sharing different points of view, and the absence of judgment and negative criticism (PS1). The harmony between this approach and the school's educative project, the structure and advice provided by the intervener-researcher, and the possibility of releasing teachers from their assignments with project funds are considered facilitating factors (PS2). Others cite the quality of the team—attentiveness, communication, patience, relevance of discussions—and the excellent framework provided by the intervener-researcher (HS1). According to the researcher, the procedure for identifying strengths and weaknesses relative to school, family, and community collaboration was carried out very successfully in the four schools. All Action Teams took great care to adapt each of the questionnaires to their milieu. Strategies were also used to ensure a higher rate of possible responses.

Challenges

One participant wished things had been spelled out clearly from the beginning “by knowing in advance what there was to be done, by deciding who would be in charge of what tasks.” Difficulties mentioned were “the problem of seeing in what direction we’re heading, since this is only the start” and “the insecurity of not knowing exactly what role we have to play” (PS1). They would have preferred the project be presented to the institutional council by the intervener-researcher rather than the school principal (PS1). Participants found it inconvenient to meet at 3:30 p.m. or evenings after class (PS1 and PS2). They had trouble convincing the whole-school team of the project's importance and relevance; they also found that the project got off to a slow start and that participants' roles had not been clearly spelled out (HS1). They deplored the time it took to understand the project: “It was getting to the specific activities, the concrete actions” (HS2).

As for the intervener-researcher, she observed right off that there was a very high resistance to theory. She chose to integrate theory into the exchanges as

soon as the opportunity came up (e.g., “you know...a lot of research shows that...”). Epstein’s typology was presented as a structure making it possible to sort out all the school’s current activities relative to school-family-community collaboration and arrange the pieces of the puzzle to pinpoint areas where improvement was needed. The intervener-researcher soon realized that the maximum number of meetings in a school year is about six or seven. To begin with, nothing can get done before the institutional council is formed, whose election usually occurs toward the end of September. Many activities are already scheduled for the start of the year and for other specified times during the year, without mentioning the numerous other committees and projects. It is obvious that at this stage, the SFC (school, family, and community) project is merely one of many. School principals have not yet developed an overall and eco-systemic vision of the interventions to design and implement in their school. For example, many participants appear to view the “Healthy School,” “Wellness-Oriented School” and “Guidance-Oriented School” programs as parallel projects. The same thing was true for projects stemming from the Québec Youth Funds, which since has ceased operations. Moreover, even though school principals agreed to participate in the action research project on a volunteer basis, it appeared during the course of the project that the support of three administration members was rather half-hearted, a fact reflected by the absence of the SFC action plans in the school success plan (equivalent to school improvement plan).

Future Challenges

Regarding future challenges, the primary schools’ participants mentioned, “With the group of teachers, it’s obvious we have to spark their interest, maybe that’ll be the challenge, to reach out to people and convince them that something needs improvement.” “With the community, the challenge might be to establish long lasting contacts, to collaborate with it, to reach out to people and get them involved at the school level” (PS1). In one high school (HS1), future challenges concerned harmony among teams within the school itself, the need for a high degree of organization, the reasonable involvement (not over-involvement) of the parents, and mobilizing all intervening parties toward concrete solutions. The difficulties anticipated correspond to the risk of an overlap with various projects and other committees, communication and openness among the various school committees, and the implementation of a communication network regarding the work of the Action Team and the parents’ involvement (HS1). The participants in the second high school (HS2) mentioned “changing teachers’ habits, introducing new ways of doing things” and “rallying everybody, even colleagues, community members, and parents

to act so that parents understand the importance of their influence on their children's success" (HS2).

As a future challenge, the intervener-researcher noted the elaboration of a detailed annual plan and a three-year plan. Annual plans were designed based on grids supplied during previous training of the intervener-researcher at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships (Baltimore, Maryland, June 1998). These same grids were published in a guide titled *School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Your Handbook for Action* (Epstein et al., 1997, 2002). It should be noted that the grids have been translated and adapted to the context of Québec. Despite the availability of these grids and the work done within the Action Team, one school did not submit its revised annual plan. A grid had likewise been planned for drawing up a three-year plan. Only PS2 submitted a three-year action plan.

After Year 3 of the Project

Interviews with Members of the Action Teams

In order to evaluate the implementation process for all school, family, and community programs in the schools, semi-directed interviews by phone were conducted with 11 members of Action Teams in June 2004 (PS1: 4 members; PS2: 2 members; HS1: 3 members; and HS2: 2 members). The responses were tape recorded and then transcribed, along with the intervener-researcher's observations and comments. Then they were coded into units of meaning using the software *N'Vivo*. In this section, we have chosen to focus on three of the categories that emerged from the analysis of the corpus of units, that is, the facilitating conditions, the challenges, and the activities that were conducted. The interview protocol is illustrated in Table 3. The interviews lasted for about an hour each. The intervener-researcher visited the sites about seven times a year. She kept the observations in the log book during the three years that the project lasted.

Table 3. Protocol of Telephone Interviews After Year 3 of The Project

1. What was your role in the SFC Action Team?
2. What did you like most about the team's dynamics?
3. What did you like least?
4. Did you feel somehow apart from the others?
5. What factors helped the team's work?
6. What factors presented obstacles to the team's work?
7. Should the Action Team have met more often? Explain.
8. Discuss the project's achievements.

9. How did the project successfully foster the participation of parents and the community?
 10. What factors favored this success?
 11. What factors hampered your efforts to promote the participation of parents and the community?
 12. Do you have the impression your school principal and colleagues grasped the relevance of the project?
 13. What could have been done to motivate them more?
 14. How did the project change the way you think and act with families and the community?
 15. With respect to your colleagues and the school staff as a whole, how did the project change their usual way of doing things?
 16. What can be done to improve the implementation and success of the school-family-community project in your school?
 17. Would it have been possible to move faster and cover more ground during the project? Explain.
 18. What do you see as a follow-up to the project?
 19. Are you satisfied with the duration of the project? Explain.
 20. What have you retained about the project as a whole?
 21. How would you advise other schools similar to yours who are interested in designing and implementing programs for school-family-community collaboration?
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Facilitating Conditions

Most Action Team members are satisfied with the frequency of the meetings: “I think if meetings had been held more frequently, they would have been redundant.” As facilitating conditions, participants at PS1 mentioned the manner in which the project had been prepared at the start: “...we knew where we were going,” the structure of the project and the positive climate during meetings: “I think everyone got along well, even though everyone was different,” and participants’ drive and motivation: “The fact that the researcher and the people from the Education Ministry, in fact there were two of them, this caused a lot of changes, too. That’s it...they took the trouble to come to our school; in my opinion, that was a big help. Because I’m sure we wouldn’t have done all we did if those persons hadn’t been there, because left to ourselves, we always find all kinds of excuses not to meet” (PS1).

For PS2, facilitating conditions, that is, the factors that positively influenced the work of the Action Team, include the clarity of the mandate, the nature of the project, the project’s relevance to the needs of the school, and the presence of the intervener-researcher. Likewise, HS1 participants mentioned the positive climate during meetings, relations among the participants in the

project, the financial assistance of the Ministry of Education, the help of the researchers, and the quality and motivation of the Action Team members. In the same vein, those interviewed in HS2 mentioned the insight given by the researcher, task sharing and exchanges of ideas among Action Team members, and participants' drive and motivation during the first two years.

Challenges

The challenges encountered by members of the PS1 Action Team are linked to certain changes in the school itself (retirements, deaths, departure of an assistant principal, etc.), a project that required confronting reality, the participation of parents and community (very difficult to promote), a lack of time and money, the instability (turnover) of Action Team members, resistance to change on the part of certain colleagues, and the existence of several other projects in the school. Participants in the PS2 Action Team pinpointed certain hindering factors such as scheduling meetings (3:30 p.m. being considered unfavorable for creativity), changes in staff from one year to another which necessarily entailed changes within the Action Team, and the need to change work habits (difficulty of having an idea accepted within the school).

Main problems regarding the HS1 project include the practical implementation of something that took a long time to decide, the lack of collaboration from the administration at certain times, the existence of several school committees that resulted in an overload of teaching responsibilities, and the turnover in members of the Action Team. Finally, one difficulty encountered in HS2 was the abstract aspect of the project. For example, one participant had the impression of going around in circles during the first year, but realized this was no longer the case the second year. Other problems mentioned by HS2 are a lack of team chemistry caused by members who didn't believe in the project, a lack of time because participants were calculating their hours as unionized employees, and a turnover in Action Team members. Here as well, former members of the Action Team had the impression of starting all over again, whereas new ones felt lost. Only two persons stayed on the Action Team the full three years.

For the intervener-researcher, one finding emerges: each school evolved at a different rate, with the two primary schools demonstrating far more rapid progress than the high schools. Various possible explanations for this difference will be examined. The main challenges highlighted relate to the socio-affective development of the Action Teams, the make-up of the Action Team, the political context and the nature of the project, and structural and cyclical conditions linked to the project.

Challenges linked to the development of the socio-affective life of the Action Teams. Within the context of an action research project, certain challenges are often associated with the developmental stages of the socio-affective life of a team (Deslandes & Turcotte, 1996; Glassman & Kates, 1986; Heap, 1987; Northen, 1987). Thus when a team is formed, it is said to be at the pre-affiliation stage, and feelings of ambivalence, insecurity, and anxiety are often directed toward the intervener-researcher relative to the team's ability to meet objectives. Next comes the power and control stage during which some members attempt to seize greater control. At this point certain individuals withdraw on their own or are asked to do so. The intimacy stage follows, characterized by greater work efficiency, self-revelation on the part of the members, and a sense of belonging to the team. Harmony is now the name of the game. Next is the differentiation stage, characterized by power sharing, reciprocity, interdependence, cooperation, and mutual support. The teams do not necessarily experience all these stages; some remain stuck at the first two stages while others evolve more quickly. Furthermore, the development process is non-linear. Even though the development of Action Teams' socio-affective life is not an objective of the present study, it is nonetheless true that certain factors found here explain the gap between the evolution and progress of work in the Action Teams of the primary schools and those of the secondary schools. At the secondary level, the two Action Teams did not appear to move beyond the power and control stage, thus causing a slow-down in productivity and even a lack of interest on the part of participants. At the primary school level, both Action Teams evolved toward intimacy and differentiation between the team members and the intervener-researcher, thus fostering a greater synergy and, as a result, contributing to the progress of the work.

Challenges linked to the composition of the Action Teams. Other difficulties relate to the instability of the Action Team and the status of members recruited for the school team. Turnover of personnel is a reality in North American schools and cannot be avoided. The problem could, however, be mitigated by appointing individuals (teachers, social workers, or others) with a permanent status, or if this is not possible, a stable temporary employee. This observation speaks volumes for a school principal's support of the project, since a principal that firmly believes in its worth will ensure that someone with credibility within the teaching staff is appointed. This credibility appears essential in the work of the liaison agent, whose role aims, notably, to mobilize the personnel. When, after year one of the project, it was decided to hold meetings during the day, recruiting parents proved to be very difficult. In one Action Team, a mother of several children was obliged to arrange childcare. In another, the parent was allowed time off from work to take part in meetings. In still another, one

of the two mothers in a rural school was a farmer; as a result, when a meeting was planned, it was necessary to make allowances for the time needed to work in the fields and milk cows. In the last team, the parent was never replaced after the first year. The work of this team, moreover, was profoundly affected by the transfer of the assistant principal, who had acted as a liaison agent and had demonstrated undeniable leadership. With regard to high school students, since there were already representatives within the institutional council and meetings took place during class time, it was decided not to include them. And last of all, such inescapable and potentially destabilizing realities as maternity and sick leave also had to be taken into account.

Challenges linked to the political context and the nature of the project. First, we must recall that the project described started before the Education Act was amended by the adoption of Bill 124 in December 2002. The latter provides for the educative project to be designed based on an analysis of the school's situation. Each institutional council must examine the students' needs, the stakes related to their success, and the characteristics and expectations of the community. The law specifies that parents and school staff be informed about the educative project and the success plan. Although there is no mention of collaboration, the school must nevertheless take into consideration the opinions of parents and the community (for more details, see Deslandes & Lemieux, 2005). Certainly the action plan on special education in 1999, *Adapting Our Schools to the Needs of All Students* (MEQ), included a commitment by the Ministry to welcome parents to the school and support their participation, and to open the school to partners with a view to forming an educative community. However, there was no solid political support on either the provincial or regional levels for the action research approach used in the present project. Because of this lack of support, the Action Teams needed more time to understand and become comfortable with the project. The sole exception was PS2, which had planned right from the start to integrate the project into its success plan for the following year. Furthermore, the very nature of the project—an approach based on co-construction—inevitably created a sense of insecurity in school administrations and liaison agents. We have only to think of those participants who demanded a detailed description of the entire procedure including the number of hours required in terms of investment. To this must be added former negative experience with, and bias against, university researchers, which seem to endure even when those responsible for initiating conflicts were long gone. Clearing the way, convincing, and conquering prejudice were a few of the challenges we decided to tackle from the beginning.

Challenges linked to structural and cyclical conditions. Other challenges relate to the way the project was presented to the school faculty as a whole. We

are at a loss to explain this. Comments by Action Team members, however, lead us to suspect that in both high schools, the project was not introduced as an approach requiring the participation of the entire school team. It seems to have been perceived as merely one project among others led by a small group of individuals on the SFC Action Team. In other words, the project was not given sufficient weight and viewed as a school priority. This compartmentalization within a committee may also be explained by the myriad existing committees, particularly in high schools. The participants of one Action Team in particular mention there were over 30 committees having very little communication with each other (HS1). As a result, it becomes difficult to know what each one is doing. Our observation is that in both high schools, knowledge of work done by a committee appears to remain in that committee only. This is why one of the two Action Teams suggested the committee's work be posted in a key spot in the school to ensure that colleagues were made aware of it (HS1). In this same school, during the last year, one committee received the mandate to start work on the educative project. The SFC Action Team observed that this new committee was unaware of anything that had been done previously. It appears that improved channels of communication would prevent a duplication of work by various committees. In the two primary schools, information sharing and exchanges of ideas among school faculty and staff were carried out not only within meetings, but also on an informal basis, for example, at lunchtime.

Another challenge is the myriad existing projects in each of the participating schools. We have only to mention the *École en Santé* (Healthy School) project, *Québec en forme* (Quebec in good shape) and the *Brundland school* (based on respect for the environment) at the primary level, and the *New Approaches, New Solutions Intervention Strategy* (see Deslandes & Lemieux, 2005) launched in 2002 at the provincial level for a 5-year period, as well as the discontinued projects associated with the Québec Youth Fund and the Guidance-Directed School at the secondary level. Our impression is that none of the school principals really possessed an overall vision of the existing projects as a whole, insofar as each new project introduced was simply tacked on to all the others. As well, we must mention certain tensions among the school principals and members of the staff, demonstrated either by mistrust or the calculation of every additional hour of work. It goes without saying that an unpleasant organizational climate, tense interpersonal relations, and a loss of confidence among the various players are no help when introducing a project that calls for change.

Furthermore, another challenge involved some team members' fear of the unknown along with an unwillingness to add one more task to an already heavy schedule. The "evaluation" component of the methods implemented was perceived as threatening by certain school principals and as complex by members

of the Action Teams. The evaluation process consisted of finding simple ways to verify the achievement of objectives for each of the methods put in place. The point was to demystify the “evaluation” component and make it accessible to those working in the field. It’s possible, however, that in a context where all schools are competing to recruit a clientele, any form of evaluation may be perceived as potentially damaging to the image of the school, especially if it highlights elements that need improvement.

Conducted Activities

With respect to the school’s conducted activities relative to the project, they were all mentioned in reference to Epstein’s six types of involvement and are listed by the participating schools in Table 4. In the two high schools, the biggest change the project generated was an awareness of the importance of parents’ or the community’s role in a school. The participants said that they were not really able to decide what action to take, since they viewed their colleagues as completely, or almost completely, ignorant of the project.

Project Follow-up, One Year Later

The two primary schools were invited to continue their project during the 2004-2005 school year. There were no site visits during the year; Action Teams were expected to continue the project on their own, that is, without the active support of the intervener-researcher. In June 2005, three participants (a teacher, a special education teacher, and an assistant principal) from the first Action Team (PS1) and two participants (a teacher and a school principal) from the second Action Team (PS2) agreed to participate in a semi-directed oral interview consisting of seven questions. The author, accompanied by an undergraduate student, conducted the interviews on-site. They lasted for about an hour each. One of the objectives was to verify to what extent and in what manner each team had organized operations without the assistance of the intervener-researcher. The idea at the start of the project was to help the schools carry out the procedure independently. The responses were recorded using *N’Vivo* software and transcribed for purposes of analysis. In this portion of the article, we dwell on three categories that were identified from the corpus of units: facilitating conditions, challenges, and recommendations. The protocol of the interview appears in Table 5.

Table 4. Conducted Activities During the 3-year Project

Types	Schools	PS1	PS2	HS1	HS2
1. Parenting		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Guide on parental skills •Leaflets to parents on motivation, hyperactivity, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Pamphlets on parental skills sent out to parents monthly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Conference on parent-adolescent relationship •Thematic workshops offered to parents by community social practitioners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Improved information on the rules for promotion from one level to another •Workshops offered to parents by the Youth Centre
2. Communicating		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mini-diplomas to 3 students-of-the-month/class •School journal written by 6th graders and sent to the parents 3 or 4 times/year •Students' portfolios presented to parents before the parent-teacher conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Information regarding school operations and activities given at the first parent-teacher conference •Information sent to the parents on the competencies the child was expected to develop •Adding of a third parent-teacher conference •Two mini-diplomas/class to students-of-the-month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Information to parents through the community newspaper •Wooden sculpture of Epstein's typology in the school conference room 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Improved curriculum and program information evenings for parents •Information about adolescent development on the school Web site •E-mail addresses of the school personnel sent to parents •Adding of a second parent-teacher conference (in Feb.)
3. Volunteering		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Questionnaire for the recruitment of volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Questionnaire for the recruitment of volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inventory of school activities supported by parent volunteers 	
4. Learning at home		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Guide for parents for helping them with homework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Six family literacy workshops/year 		
5. Decision making			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Development of an OPP (parental participation organization) 		
6. Collaborating with community		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Intergenerational mail 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Kiosk supplying information to the parents about services available from the school •Inventory of school activities supported by parent volunteers 	

Table 5. Protocol of Interviews During Follow-Up

1. What did you achieve this year as a follow-up to the school-family-community project?
 2. Did the Action Team continue to hold meetings? If so, how often?
 3. Was the issue of school-family-community collaboration taken into account in your success plan? If so, in what way?
 4. What do you foresee in the year ahead?
 5. What did you find easy in the follow-up to the project?
 6. What did you find difficult...?
 7. Do you need additional support to continue on in this direction? If so, what type of support? Or, what conditions (in terms of time and resources) would facilitate your work?
-

Facilitating Conditions

Members of the PS1 Action Team recognized that there were no formal meetings of the Action Team members. They exchanged information about the project “in the corridors”. On the other hand, members recognized it would be useful for the PS1 Action Team to meet, for example, four or five times a year. One participant emphasizes: “For me, it’s useful because it’s re-stimulating. That’s why it’s important. And because it ‘doles out jobs,’ and lets me know where the other one is in her ‘job’” (PS1).

For the PS2 Action Team, there was no formal meeting. On the other hand, since the school-family-community group was part of the school’s success plan, each time a meeting was held on the success plan, Action Team members discussed the projects among themselves and with other teachers. In other words, the issue of school, family, and community partnership was taken into account in the success plan of school PS2. Both members interviewed offer the following information: “For us, in our context, the project came at the right time. For creating the educative project and everything.” The PS2 Team perceived, in terms of facilitating elements, (1) the integration of the project into the life of the school: “What was facilitating? That it wasn’t just parachuted in. The secret to getting something like that applied is to have it become part of everyday life. And to integrate it;” (2) the project’s usefulness for the teachers: “They have to know what purpose it serves. The teachers need that, they need to know where it’ll get us and how we can use it. They don’t have time to waste. They have to be able to use it in their everyday life;” and (3) committee members’ participation in the educative project: “What was facilitating was that we were all on the same committee.” The participants mention that the integration of the school-family-community project into the educative (reform) project is truly

a facilitating condition: “Well, me, I see conditions in terms of time, resources. What’s facilitating is what we just said, it’s integrating the project into the educative project, into the success plan, that’s how it has to be.” “If not, it becomes an extra burden.” Another facilitating condition is “to have a parent as an example, meaning somebody who knows how the system works.” One last element was added on the subject of teachers’ pay: “With the money we had, we were able to give teachers paid release time, and that was very facilitating.”

Future Challenges

As for challenges inherent in continuing the project, PS1 participants mention specific needs such as respect for the budget allocated, the need for additional money, and the management of special activities like the school newspaper. One member suggested: “Money!” (PS1), another adding, “Even if it was only a small symbolic amount, it made a difference. And we had a little left over from the preceding year” (PS1).

One PS2 participant declared: “There’s still a lot to do in terms of getting parents involved” (PS2). The other participant continued in the same vein: “And then, if you let that go, at that moment the family-school-community element will fall off the agenda. Because we didn’t win the battle for it. As long as teachers are still afraid to have parents come to the school, and as long as parents are still afraid to come to the school, we have to keep on fighting. But I don’t see things working out if we don’t set up a committee, I’d be afraid the whole thing would fall through”. These comments show that work remains to be done regarding teachers’ resistance to integrating parents into the school. One participant affirms, “...I’m sure that if you question teachers, you’ll find the most difficult task in their profession is dealing with parents” (PS2).

Other future challenges mentioned are (1) finding simple methods of evaluation: “What I found hard was evaluating, it didn’t matter if there were results or not. Because we’re not calculating, like...uh...is he eating two apples or three. It’s not concrete, what we have to calculate, it’s for the long term. It’s in the long term that we see consequences. That’s what I find hard” (PS2); and (2) the parent’s place on the Action Team. One participant described a problem with this issue as follows: “I find it hard to have a parent, because parents don’t know what’s going on inside the organization. I mean the machinery...They don’t know how the school works. All they know is what they see. You know, that’s really difficult” (PS2). Another one added:

When parents come to the school, they have to have a very well-defined role to begin with. I don’t care, when they come to school, it has to be for a reason. When they come for the library, they come for the library only. They really have to have very specific duties, because if not, they take on a role that doesn’t belong to them. (PS2)

So you see, these persons who are now full-time volunteers, when they first came, they didn't have any idea what to do. Now they're starting to understand—about involvement, decoration, the library. (PS2)

With respect to the additional support needed to continue in this direction, only PS1 Action Team members mentioned something such as the presence of a group leader with credibility, competencies, and interpersonal skills, that is, someone who believes in the school-family-community project. One also suggested: "There should be a facilitator. Someone effectively on the school board. Someone who's really involved in all the schools. That person could centralize community relations...." Another added "someone from the outside, a liaison agent. That is, someone who's not a part of the school organization, but has credibility..." (PS1).

Lessons Learned

Obviously, the projects conducted from 2001 to 2005 cannot be considered "success stories" of the integration of parent and community involvement into the schools. In the two primary schools, and mainly in PS2, actions were taken that could lead, potentially, to changes in attitudes and behaviors regarding school-family-community collaboration. It is important to note that leaders emerged in the form of school principals, liaison agents, and members of the Action Teams. The activities designed targeted parenting, communication, volunteering, decision making, learning at home, and community involvement. After the first year, everyone felt comfortable with the approach, which they qualified as being clear and well-structured. In addition, they felt more at ease with the evaluation process.

At the very most, members of the Action Teams in the two high schools were sensitized to the importance of school-family-community collaboration. At the end of the project, however, mistrust and turf issues still remained, along with unease vis-à-vis evaluation and an unwillingness to produce annual and three-year plans. The very few activities developed focused on information, with some participants expressing the view that these activities would have been developed in any case.

Many of the lessons learned are in line with Epstein's recommendations about taking an Action Team Approach (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002). A crucial first element that emerged for designing and implementing a program for school, family, and community collaboration is the need to integrate such a program into the educative project and the success plan (similar to the school improvement plan in the U.S.) so as to make it a school priority. PS2 adopted this action, and events progressed much more smoothly here than in the

other schools. It consequently becomes possible to develop a global vision of school objectives and avoid a profusion of compartmentalized committees. At the same time, channels of communication must be established to allow information to circulate among members of the school faculty (and among the committees), and also among these and the parents and community.

A second crucial element involves leadership on the part of the school administration and members of the Action Team, who must clearly demonstrate through their actions a determination to move toward greater collaboration between the school, the students' families, and the community. In our view, the absence of such leadership is the main reason for the lag in development of the projects in the two high schools and PS1 during the first year. A school principal who truly believes in school-family-community collaboration will ensure that only motivated teachers or non-teaching staff members are appointed to the Action Team. As well, a school principal who is a true leader will be committed, along with the Action Team members, to evaluating the means put forward. He or she will also promote the development of collegiality between the Action Team members and the school personnel. According to Epstein (personal communication, December 14, 2005), this is about the whole awareness story. In other words, the school principal must provide opportunities that allow Action Team members to share ideas and information on SFC to promote awareness among other staff, parents, and representatives of the community. Leadership must also be undertaken by the school council to make sure that the SFC partnerships program appears as a priority in the school's success plan.

A third essential element is the presence of a liaison agent with a stable and credible relationship with other players in the school and with demonstrated motivational skills. We believe, increasingly, that a liaison agent should also be present at the school board level (district level) to work simultaneously with a number of primary and secondary schools and community organizations.

Fourth in importance is patience, a *sine qua non* for Action Team members, who must allow themselves time to become familiar with the project. However, there must be concrete action as soon as possible during the first year of the project. Their next step is to draw a clear picture of the school's current situation. Team members and liaison agents must understand the obligation to make both a short-term plan (annual action plan) and a long-term plan (three-year action plan). As well, they must understand the necessity of making written records of steps taken and their evaluation results with a view to mitigating the impact of staff turnover.

Fifth, some schools may need access to special funds to give participants within the school paid release time from their regular schedules to organize

meetings and team work. Finally, each school's rhythm must be respected. It must be accepted that some schools are at the consciousness-raising stage with regard to school-family-community collaboration. For more mobilized schools, in addition to strategies for providing information, more steps must be taken to initiate action (e.g., workshops for parents concerning help with learning at home).

In brief, school, family, and community collaboration must go beyond the "project" stage mentality and become an integral part of the educative projects and success plans of every primary and secondary school in Québec. Collaboration relates not only to the activities implemented, but also to attitudes and behaviors characterized by mutual trust and respect. An approach of this nature aims for changes in mentality and attitudes that cannot occur in just three years. Accordingly, these initiatives must continue and become part of the Ministry of Education's expectations for schools in Québec. It is imperative that increasingly more initiatives emerge from the field, in other words, from the bottom up. As we've already stated, "In the majority of our so-called ordinary Québec schools, the notion of partnership increasingly includes a sense of collaboration. The partnership based on reciprocity thus remains an aim, an objective to achieve" (Deslandes, 1999, p. 46). Various tools and resources must be made available to schools to support them in their approach, for example, the measuring instruments put forward by the *École Montréalaise* (2004). As well, the "school-family-community collaboration" theme will soon be developed on the Web site of the *Observatoire International* (International Observatory on Academic Achievement, IOAA) of CRIRES (*Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire* [Centre for research and intervention regarding school success]). And we must consider, too, the exchanges on innovative practices that have taken place between the schools and the various groups of players, not only in the Province of Québec but also in the other provinces of Canada and across North America.

We have observed over the past decade or so that even though researchers come from different countries and speak different languages, they share numerous research instruments, their results have several points in common, and their recommendations lead in similar directions. School-family-community collaboration is no longer a single country issue. It is a preoccupation that is being shared by politicians, administrators, educators, parents, and community members around the world. One of the main challenges that lie ahead for SFC researchers is to broaden in focus to look at similarities and differences that emerge from studies well beyond their home country's frontiers in order to make important contributions to the development of this field.

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Author's Note

This research was supported by grants to the author from the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec. The author wishes to recognize the participation of Helene Fournier in data analysis.

