

# **A Vision of Home-School Partnership:**

## **Three complementary conceptual frameworks**

**Rollande Deslandes**

*Dr Deslandes is a professor at the Universite du Quebec a Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, Canada.*

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# **A vision of home-school partnership: Three complementary conceptual frameworks**

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This presentation aims to examine the complementary nature of three conceptual frameworks of home-school partnership. Epstein's (1987) overlapping spheres of influence model illustrates a global and holistic vision of partnership. The model of parental involvement designed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) adds to understanding by focusing on parental sense of efficacy and parental role construction. The enabling and empowerment model (Bouchard, 1998; Dunst et al., 1992) focuses on the influence of attitudes and behaviors within parent-teacher interactions in a reciprocal partnership. A vision of collaborative partnership appears to prevail in Quebec schools at the moment. Despite some reported difficulties, however, reciprocal partnership represents a promising avenue.

The school-family relation is currently a topic of interest among parents, teachers, policymakers and all those involved in childhood education, as is made clear in a report of the OECD (1997) and a Notice of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (1998). It is the subject of a number of researches at the provincial, national and international levels as well (e.g., Bouchard, 1998; Epstein, 1996, 2001; OECD, 1997; Pourtois & Desmit, 1997; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). A study of both theory and practice highlights a trend towards parental involvement, while the prevailing political discourse aims to develop collaboration - partnership, even - between schools and families. Amendments to Quebec's Education Act in December 1997, for example, affirmed that parents were partners in school management by virtue of their participation in the school council. Those in favor of the partnership approach cite the results of several researches demonstrating the benefits of collaboration, notably, an improvement in school grades, behaviors and attitudes (Epstein, 1996). Not everyone agrees with this approach, however, especially those who view partnership as a means of maintaining teachers' professional control by considering parental support as an option (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Still others deplore the predominance of a vision of school-family collaboration dictated solely by the school and its teachers, insisting that a one-way partnership is not viable (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Lareau (1996), for her part, categorically rejects a concept of partnership based on equal status, since she believes teachers should have greater power than parents. Cochran and Dean (1991) call for compensatory programs of parent education as well as interventions based on enabling and empowerment (Dunst et al., 1992). For Bouchard (1998), however, these two last principles meet the very definition of partnership as '... the actualization of the resources and competencies of each' (p. 23) (free translation). In a similar vein, the OECD (1997) describes partnership as '...a process, since it involves learning to work together and valuing each partner's positive contribution to the relationship' (p. 58) (free translation).

During training sessions for teachers and human service practitioners, we often encountered questions such as the following: ‘What do you do when the parents you want to see never come to the school?’ or ‘What can be done to attract parents who are difficult to reach?’ This led us to reflect upon the notion of partnership that now prevails in schools in Quebec and upon how this model of partnership corresponds to the one advocated by various educational organizations. The present communication will examine the complementary nature of the three conceptual frameworks related to home-school partnerships: the model of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1987), the model of parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995, 1997) and the family enabling and empowerment model (Bouchard, 1998; Dunst et al., 1992). Of the three, the model of parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995, 1997) will be given particular attention because of its concern with the problem of difficult-to-reach families. Finally, we will take a look at the type of partnership that now exists in several schools in Quebec, more specifically at the secondary level.

Our view of genuine partnership is one based on mutual trust, common goals and two-way communication. To collaborate is to participate in the accomplishment of a task or the assumption of a responsibility. Partnership is therefore a collaborative relationship between two parties, and parental involvement is a means of establishing it. Certain authors use the term ‘reciprocal’ partnership to describe a mutual sharing of tasks or responsibilities, and the term ‘collaborative’ or ‘associative’ partnership to describe a situation where a task or responsibility is assumed at the request of the school and its teachers (Bouchard, 1998; Boutin & Le Cren, 1998; Dunst et al., 1992; Epstein, 1992).

### **The Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model**

Inspired by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) and designed from a social and organizational perspective (Litwak & Meyer, 1974; Seeley, 1981, cited in Epstein, 1987, 1992, 1996), the overlapping spheres of influence model emphasizes the cooperation and complementarity of schools and families, and encourages communication and collaboration between the two institutions (Epstein, 1987, 1996). This model consists of spheres representing the family and the school that may be pushed together or pulled apart by three forces: time (Force A), the characteristics, philosophies and practices of the family (Force B) and those of the school (Force C). These forces may or may not help create occasions for shared activities between the school and the family. We note, for example, that the spheres overlap to a greater extent during a student’s preschool and primary school years (Force A). Likewise, when parents participate in the education of their child (Force B), the zone of interaction between the two spheres increases. The same scenario is repeated when the teacher’s activities encourage parental involvement in schooling (Force C). Interaction between the two spheres is at a maximum when the school and the family function as genuine partners within an overall program that includes a number of shared activities. The model emphasizes reciprocity among teachers, families and students and recognizes that students are active agents in school-family relations. A teacher may, for example, solicit parental involvement by asking children to question members of their families about the kinds of work they do. The model assumes that an exchange of skills, abilities and interests between parents and

teachers that is based upon mutual respect and a sharing of common goals will benefit children's learning and development (Epstein, 1996, 2001).

School-family partnership activities have been grouped into a typology consisting of six categories:

- (a) parents' basic obligations towards their children (type 1), such as supervision, guidance and the provision of needed materials;
- (b) the school's basic obligations towards children and their families (type 2), such as communications to parents about school programs and students' progress;
- (c) parental involvement at school (type 3), shown by the volunteering of parents in the classroom and their attendance at special events;
- (d) parental involvement in home learning (type 4), including help with school work, discussions about school, encouragement, compliments, etc.;
- (e) parental involvement in decision-making (school, school commission, etc.) (type 5), which refers, among other things, to parents' involvement in the school council, and
- (f) collaboration with the community (type 6), that is, exchanges among parents within the same community (Epstein, 1992, 1996).

Parents who are less involved in the schooling of their children are usually from non-traditional families with lower levels of education (Force B) (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1992; Deslandes, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999). These parents generally tend to help a child more in primary than secondary school, and to give more attention to one who is doing well or beginning to have problems than one who has been experiencing longstanding difficulties (Force A) (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Of the variables examined, the activities implemented by the school, that is, school-family partnership programs, have proved to be the best predictors of parental involvement (Force C) (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). In other words, parents become more involved in their children's education at home and at school when they perceive that their collaboration is actively encouraged by the teachers and the school. Taking as a guide the overlapping spheres of influence model with its typology of school-family partnership activities, we recently did a study comparing the levels of involvement of parents of students in the regular secondary III program (N=525) with those of parents of students in special education (N=112) (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999). The latter group was composed of students with learning difficulties or behavioral problems who were at least two years behind in school. As reported in the educational literature, the families of problem students had lower levels of education and tended to be non-traditional (single-parent, blended or other). The results showed significant differences in the level of involvement of the two groups of parents, particularly with respect to activities categorized as type 1 (e.g., parental supervision), type 3 (e.g., involvement in the school activities of the student), and type 4 (e.g., home involvement such as help with homework, discussions and encouragement). Since these are the very types of parental involvement that have a positive effect on school performance according to students' perceptions, how can these differences be explained? For an answer, we must look beyond Epstein's model to the model of parental involvement designed by Hoover-Demsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), which seems to offer additional, or at least more detailed, ways of examining the issue.

### **The model of parental involvement**

Shaped in part by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1976, 1986) and based upon the results of psychological and sociological studies, the model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) examines the process of parental involvement beginning with parents' decision to become involved (table 2). The model, which is read from bottom to top, reasons that parents decide to participate when they understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents, when they believe they can positively influence their child's education and when they perceive that the child and the school wish them to be involved. The model suggests that once parents make the decision to participate, they choose specific activities shaped by their perception of their own skills and abilities, other demands on their time and energy and specific invitations to involvement from children, teachers and schools. The model also holds that parental involvement influences children's educational outcomes by means of modeling, reinforcement and instruction, three mechanisms which are, in turn, mediated by the developmental appropriateness of parents' strategies and the fit between parents' actions and the expectations of the school. The goal of parental involvement here is its influence on the child's educational outcomes, particularly his or her knowledge, skills and sense of efficacy for succeeding in school. For the purposes of this study, our discussion will be limited to the first level of this model.

At the first level, the model suggests that parents' decision to become involved in their child's education varies according to

- 1) their construction of the parental role,
- 2) their sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed, and
- 3) the invitations, demands and opportunities for involvement presented by the child and the school.

#### ***1 - Construction of the Parental Role***

Parental role construction is of primary importance because it determines what type of activities parents will consider necessary when interacting with their child. It is influenced by their understanding of the parental role and their views on child development, child-rearing and home-support roles. Accordingly, parents are unlikely to become involved if they believe teaching should be left solely to teachers (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud & Dornbusch, 1993), or if they are convinced an adolescent is primarily responsible for his or her own education (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Role theory applied to parents' choices regarding their child's education (Forsyth, 1990) holds that the groups to which parents belong – family, school, workplace – have expectations about appropriate behaviors, including those concerning parental involvement. If the school expects little parental involvement, for example, parents will be less inclined to participate (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parents' Beliefs About Child Development and Child-Rearing Relationships have been established between parental beliefs, values, goals and knowledge on one hand, and a variety of parental behaviors pertinent to the development of the child on the other (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). For example, parents who believe that children need affection and external structure and that the goal of education is to develop skills and creativity will be inclined to converse more with their children and monitor their progress in school (for a more detailed discussion, see Deslandes, 1996).

### **Beliefs about Parents' Home-Support Roles in Child and Adolescent Education**

Lareau's studies (1996) demonstrate that social class influences beliefs about home-support roles in children's education. Parents from a lower socioeconomic level tend to have a separated view of home and school, while those from the higher-income groups consider themselves partners with the school in educating their children (see Deslandes, 1996 for a detailed description of these theories). As a whole, the research suggests that parents develop beliefs and understandings regarding parental role expectations from their membership in specific groups (family, school, church, community, society in general). Their views on the development and rearing of children and adolescents and on appropriate home-support roles all influence their decision of whether or not to participate in their children's education.

#### ***2 - Parents' sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school***

Do parents believe their involvement can benefit a child's educational outcomes? The self-efficacy construct is founded on theories of personal efficacy, work on attributions for school success, personal theories of intelligence and other studies of parental strategies for solving school-related problems. Taken together, these theories offer insight into the specific manifestations of parental efficacy that may be related to school involvement. According to the self-efficacy theory of Bandura (1989, 1997), parents first develop goals for their behaviors based on anticipated outcomes, then plan actions to achieve these goals, which are in turn influenced by parents' estimate of their abilities in a given situation. Individuals with a strong sense of self efficacy will set higher goals and have a higher commitment to achieving them. Accordingly, parents with a strongly developed sense of efficacy will be more likely to participate in their child's education, since they believe this will benefit his or her educational outcomes. At the secondary level, parents appear to have less confidence in their ability to help with school work (Eccles & Harold, 1996), and the same appears true for parents with a lower level of education (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

### **Beliefs about Ability, Effort and Luck as Causes of Child and Adolescent School Success**

Work in this area suggests that parental attributions to child effort are often associated with higher performance among children, while parental attributions to luck are associated with poorer performance. Likewise, parents will persevere in their efforts and expect success if they believe they can control desired outcomes. It may be inferred, then, that if parents believe that unstable and manageable factors, such as effort, are responsible for a child's weak performance, they will become involved in the child's education until success is achieved. On the other hand, parents may choose not to become involved if they attribute their own or their child's weak performance to stable and innate factors, such as a child's lack of ability or a parent's lack of knowledge (Henderson & Dweck, 1990; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

### **Theories of Intelligence**

It appears that parents who believe in the development of intelligence, most notably through effort and perseverance, tend to emphasize the role of effort (their own and the

child's) in the learning process. Research indicates that parents with a strong belief in their ability to help their child succeed are likely to have an incremental perception of intelligence, that is, they believe their involvement in the child's education will help improve his or her knowledge and performance. On the other hand, parents with a weak sense of self-efficacy tend to hold to an entity theory of intelligence: they believe that success at school depends on ability rather than effort and that their help will consequently have little impact (Henderson & Dweck, 1990).

### **Strategies for Solving School-Related Problems**

Studies emphasize that whereas parents with a higher sense of efficacy help their child anticipate and solve current problems in school (e.g., how to work with a tutor, prepare for secondary school, change friends, etc), those with a weak sense of efficacy are more likely to rely upon the child or the school to solve problems, or upon luck or the interventions of others to improve difficult situations for their children (Baker & Stevenson, 1986). In conclusion, parental efficacy, attributions, theories of intelligence and strategies for solving school-related problems may all explain parental decisions about involvement in children's education. Efficacy theory suggests that parents with a strong sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed tend to believe their involvement will yield positive results. Research on attributions shows a link between parents' sense of efficacy and the emphasis they place on effort, rather than ability or luck, as being essential to success. Parents who hold to incremental theories of intelligence are likely to have a higher sense of efficacy for helping a child succeed. In other words, parental involvement will be perceived as valuable if the target of the parents' efforts – the child's intelligence, ability or school performance – is viewed as something that can be changed. Finally, research suggests that parents with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to develop strategies for anticipating or solving school-related problems.

### ***3 - General invitations, demands and opportunities for parental involvement***

The question to ask here is: Do parents perceive that the child and the school want them to be involved? An affirmative answer may be based upon a child's clear affirmation of the importance of parental involvement, a school climate that is inviting and teacher attitudes and behaviors that are warm and welcoming.

### ***General Opportunities, Invitations and Demands Presented by the Child***

According to the authors mentioned here, parental involvement is highest at the primary level, declines significantly around the fourth grade and reaches its lowest peak at the secondary level (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Deslandes, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996). Reasons for this decline are the child's developmental stage (e.g., the adolescent who wants more independence), parents' sense of efficacy for helping their child solve problems and the greater complexity of school work at the secondary level. The level of school performance appears to be linked to high parental involvement. Accordingly, adolescents who succeed well and have high aspirations say they receive more emotional support (encouragement, congratulations, discussions, etc.) from their parents than do others (Deslandes, 1996; Deslandes & Potvin, 1998). A few types of involvement are an exception to the rule, however. Researchers note more communication between parents

and teachers and more parent-adolescent interactions concerning schoolwork during times of school-related difficulties (Deslandes, 1996; Deslandes & Royer, 1997; Lee, 1994). The child's personal qualities - temperament, learning style, preferences - are also factors that may influence parents' decision about whether or not to become involved in the child's education (Eccles & Harold, 1993).

### ***General Opportunities, Invitations and Demands Presented by Schools and Teachers***

Epstein (1996, 2001) affirms that teacher and school practices, most notably school-family partnership programs, play an essential role in the promotion of parental involvement at all socioeconomic levels. This brings us to Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model (see table 1), which illustrates interpersonal and inter-institutional interactions as well as a typology of six types of parental involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), however, maintain that the two other constructs - especially that of parental role construction - are even more crucial to parental decision-making than invitations. In other words, if parents do not believe they should be involved in a child's education, their sense of efficacy and perception of invitations will not be sufficient to predict their involvement. Parental sense of efficacy appears to be equally important in the decision to become involved. Clearly, the belief they are capable of helping their child succeed increases the probability of a positive decision. The lowest likelihood of involvement occurs when parental role construction is weak, that is, when parents do not believe they should be involved in their child's education and have at the same time a low sense of efficacy.

The model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler demonstrates that to increase parental involvement, the school and the teachers must focus, at least in part, upon parents' perspective on the issue. In Quebec, we are presently examining the first level of Hoover-Dempsey's model of parental involvement. The experimentation took place in May 2001. Over 1 000 parents of elementary school students and nearly 850 parents of secondary school students have filled in and returned their questionnaires (Deslandes, 2000-2003). Since parents with a high sense of efficacy who believe they should participate in their child's schooling will tend to become involved, teachers should create occasions for parent-teacher meetings and work actively to show that parents can positively influence their child's education. The following partnership framework illustrates this principle.

### **The Family Enabling and Empowerment Model**

Used by European, (Pourtois & Desmet, 1997), American (Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette & Hamby, 1992) and Québécois (Bouchard, 1998; Bouchard, Talbot, Pelchat & Boudreault, 1996) authors, the reciprocal partnership model is based on the principles of enabling and empowerment, and advocates a parent-teacher relation calling for a complete sharing of knowledge, skills and experiences. Empowerment involves the actualization of each person's resources and competencies, while enabling refers to parents' ability to define their role and determine the nature of their collaboration (Bouchard, 1998; Bouchard et al., 1996; Cochran, 1989; Cochran & Dean, 1991; Dunst et al., 1992).

This model describes a parent-teacher relation based on mutual exchange in which each party learns from the knowledge and experience of the other. Bouchard (1998) refers to the social pedagogy of intervention, meaning that educational attitudes, beliefs and practices facilitate interdependence and reciprocity in learning.

A partnership approach must necessarily take into account each partner's expectations and point of view (Dunst et al., 1992; Pourtois & Desmet, 1997). As well, it must be based upon a notion of equality which recognizes that each party – both the parent and the teacher – has a particular knowledge and expertise to share. Thus, parents as well as teachers manifest strengths that complement those of the other partners. Dunst et al. (1992) describe four categories of characteristics favorable for establishing a partnership (see table 4): (a) emotional predispositions (attitudes) based on trust, commitment, generosity, empathy and understanding; (b) intellectual predispositions (beliefs) based on honesty, trust, mutual respect, flexibility and the sharing of responsibility; (c) open, two-way communication that presupposes active listening and self-revelation, and (d) actions that manifest attitudes and beliefs (see Figure 4)

Bouchard (1998) affirms that these actions are reflected in the theory of communicative action espoused by Habermas (1987, and cited in Bouchard, 1998), which discusses behaviors that express the intentions and actions of the actors in a partnership. Communicative action involves a reconciling of all points of view and a search for consensus, which approaches the principle of equality underlying the reciprocal partnership model. As mentioned above, parents are perceived as educational resources who can enrich the teacher within a relationship of mutual exchange. Bouchard et al. (1996) give a few examples of behaviors that facilitate partnership, notably, the recognition of expertise (e.g., 'Have you observed any progress?') and the recognition of collaboration (e.g., 'You're doing a lot for your child; I see you really want her grades to improve'). In short, the enabling and empowerment model described above emphasizes the use of knowledge and experience that are most likely to develop an individual's resources.

### **The complementary nature of the three conceptual frameworks and the notion of partnership**

The relevance of Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model (1987, 1992, 1996, 2001) to the concept of partnership is seen at the organizational level. This model allows for a holistic analysis of the obstacles and facilitating factors associated with school-family partnership and of the significant role played by the actors involved in childhood education throughout the life cycle. The model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), in turn, expands on Epstein's model by emphasizing the importance of the parents' philosophy (Force B) and the role of the student (Force A) in school-family relations. What leads a parent to make the decision to become involved? Here the spheres of influence model proves inadequate, since it fails to describe the effects of family and individual psychological characteristics on the school-family partnership, and these characteristics must be examined in order to determine effective activities for encouraging partnership. Among the most promising activities in the case of difficult-to-reach parents are those whereby parents, teachers, schools and students create

opportunities for the social construction of the parental role, including collaboration and a higher sense of efficacy. The enabling and empowerment model, moreover, refocuses our attention on the interactional dimensions at the center of the spheres of influence model. It highlights the often difficult-to-bridge gap between intentions and actual achievement, particularly with respect to the parents of problem students. The model is founded upon attitudes and behaviors that are essential to the development, use and increase of individual competencies. Today there seems to be a growing awareness that individual parent-teacher meetings marked by mutual respect, empathy and sharing can have repercussions on the eventual engagement of parents in partnership activities implemented for all the parents of children in the school. To sum up, the three models described here complement each other to the extent they lead to strategies for improving the efficacy of all the actors involved, thereby creating successful school-family partnerships.

The examination of these theoretical models, particularly the model of enabling and empowerment, has contributed to a new understanding of partnership by emphasizing the study of parent-teacher interactions. This leads to the following question: Can we maintain that a genuine partnership - that is, a reciprocal relationship - exists now in the so-called *regular* schools of Quebec? Based on our observations and the work we are doing at present, the notion of partnership currently being advocated consists, rather, of collaboration in response to teachers' requests with a view to examining ways in which parents can help teachers improve their children's academic performance. Nevertheless, this attempt and others like it meet with resistance, since these practices have generally not been the custom among French Quebecers, especially at the secondary level. The theoretical models, it would appear, describe an idea whose time is yet to come.

We've seen that certain conditions are essential to the establishment of a genuine partnership. First of all, we must ask if partnership is both a desired and desirable option. Next, the expectations and perceptions of the different groups involved in childhood education must be taken into account. We support the view advanced by the OECD in its 1997 report that the development of partnership is an ongoing process that is continually subject to negotiation. At the moment, we view partnership as an ideal or goal towards which parents, teachers and schools must work together. This vision, however, is not clouded by romantic notions of partnership that fail to take its limitations into account. We realize that partnership is not a panacea and that, if it is to be successful, the right balance must be achieved among the actors involved. Nevertheless, we believe partnership to be a path of the future that requires a complete change in our ways of thinking and acting, and that this is a change our policymakers heartily endorse (CSE, 1996).

Dunst et al. (1992) emphasize that to establish a genuine partnership takes time. As an example, the school could make teachers more available for discussions with parents, or allow for the hiring of a liaison officer to facilitate parent-teacher interactions. In this era of budget cuts, is it realistic to think a genuine partnership can be developed within such a context? As far as teachers are concerned, this vision of partnership has particularly important consequences for communicative action. We can imagine program orientations

where the acquiring of skills and experience in interpersonal relations will become increasingly more important. All in all, it appears that partnership between the school and family (and even the community) will constitute an interesting development in the decade ahead.

To sum up, Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model (1987, 1992, 1996, 2001) is an inspiration for its overall vision of the different factors that influence school-family partnerships. The parental involvement model of Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), for its part, allows for a better understanding of the reasons for a parent's choice to participate or not in school-related activities: parental role construction, sense of efficacy and invitations to become involved appear to be the determining factors. A respect for and openness to others are the psychological prerequisites for all efforts to promote parental involvement. Recognition of the value of others and the fulfillment of their potential are at the very heart of the enabling and empowerment model (Bouchard, 1998; Dunst et al., 1992), which is based on communication skills that foster cooperation and partnership. In the majority of so-called regular schools in Quebec today, partnership tends to be seen as a collaborative affair. Reciprocal partnership is, for the moment, a goal that remains to be achieved. But things are progressing. In May 2001, the current presenter was mandated by the Quebec Ministry of Education (Deslandes, 2001-2004) to work on research action projects with two elementary and two secondary schools in order to identify models of implementation and evaluation of family-school-community partnership programs.

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