

# Understanding Complex Relationships between Teachers and Parents

**Rollande Deslandes**

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières  
Trois-Rivières, Québec

**Sylvie Barma**

Université Laval  
Québec (Québec)

**Lucille Morin**

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières  
Trois-Rivières, Québec

Collaborative relationships between school and families are increasingly put forward as a means to promote student success and persistence. This collaborative work sometimes creates tensions and misunderstandings (Ravn, 2005) that can exacerbate divisions of power and reproduce inequalities (e.g., Crozier, 2000; Lareau, 2011; Vincent 2000). The main purpose of this study is to identify the areas of tensions and inner contradictions that emerge in the teacher-parent relationships in order to guide them while engaging in individual and collective transformation processes. Relying on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s proposed model (2010), we conducted in-depth interviews with volunteered elementary and secondary teachers. Salient findings are discussed in light of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2015). These include mainly issues of trust versus control when it comes to choosing communication tools and issues related to the hierarchical status and power inside and outside the school when it comes to the redistribution of actions among the school community members. As a promising research and intervention avenue, the authors suggest to apply the Change Laboratory method (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013) anchored in CHAT and that uses mirror data to reflect upon and foster transformative processes, hence, relationships between teachers and parents.

*Keywords:* Teacher-parent relationships, collaboration, role, tensions, contradictions, transformative processes, cultural-historical activity theory

## Context and Problem Statement

Over the past forty years or so, a plethora of studies at the national and international levels have shown unambiguously the essential role of the family in terms of educational success and the crucial role of educators in providing support to parents in order to support their child better (e.g., Deslandes, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Jeynes, 2011). This call for collaboration between schools and families is necessarily based on positive and constructive relationships between teachers and parents that are informative, collaborative and based on mutual trust and respect. There are in fact the essential conditions for the impact on educational success to be optimal (Christenson,

2003; Deslandes, 2010). School-family partnership refers to family responsibilities and the role of the school in updating the involvement of parents in school work (Epstein, 2011). However, the division of responsibilities seems more rhetoric than practice. As found in other countries like in Denmark (e.g., Ravn, 2005), it seems that the responsibilities of sharing expectations have not materialized in all environments (Deslandes, 2012). How can such a situation be explained? Could unveiling accumulated tensions in the teacher-parent relationships facilitate partnerships?

In Quebec (Canada), there is a strong political will to support parental involvement. In Legal provisions such as the Law on Public Instruction Act 124 adopted in 2002 in connection with the educational project and the success plan helped to expand the role of the governing board and of parents in relation to school (Deslandes & Lemieux, 2005). In the Quebec curriculum reform

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rollande Deslandes, e-mail: rollande.deslandes@uqtr.ca

implemented in 2001 as well as in the publications of numerous documents such as *School I care! – Together for Student Success* (MELS, 2009), the Ministry of Education emphasizes the importance of parents in supporting students. In the Ministry of Education reference frame of 12 competencies that pre-service teachers must develop before entering the field. Especially Competency 9 requires teachers to involve parents and inform them about their child's success and school life. Expectations that are described go beyond information on programs, work at home, the school functioning rules and suggestions on how to help and support their child. There are also expectations of communications by letters or other contributions made by parents who show some talents or interests. They call for dialogue based on a relationship of trust that makes a division of labor with the family possible (Deslandes, 2012; Schaedel, Deslandes, & Eshet, 2013).

Despite all of the above policies and official documents, some researchers do not believe that things have changed much over the past fifteen years (e.g., Dumoulin, Thériault, Duval, & Tremblay, 2013). Indeed, comments brought to our attention, either by the media or by pre-service teachers in return from their internship or by in-service teachers indicate expectations from parents, sometimes disproportionate to them, suggesting a predominance of the client approach adopted by many parents.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

A great number of studies have focused on the identification of factors that may hinder effective teacher-parent relationships. These include, among others, some characteristics linked to youngsters (e.g., low school engagement and achievement), their families (e.g., non-traditional structure and low education level) and their teachers (e.g., in disadvantaged schools) (Deslandes, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Grant & Ray, 2013). Other researchers have examined the school and the teachers' practices implemented to promote parental involvement. One interesting finding was that many teachers still favor traditional modes of parental involvement, for instance, parental involvement in outings and fundraising (Cankar, Deutsch, & Kolar, 2009). Also important are research results that have highlighted the fact that a clumsy participation can exacerbate divisions of power and reproduce

inequalities between schools, teachers and parents (e.g., Crozier, 2000; Lareau, 2011; Vincent 2000).

Obviously, collaborative work that requires the sharing of responsibilities between teachers and parents can be a source of tension (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Likewise, the expectations with respect to each other are not always clearly expressed (Glasgow & Whitney, 2009; Kruger & Michalek, 2011). It is the same with respect to responsibilities and the definition of their roles (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010). From these fuzzy spaces emerge dilemmas and misunderstandings to which Ravn (2005) refers as ambiguous relationships. In the current study based on teachers' perspectives and situated at a micro-level, we are particularly interested in the predictive variables explaining teachers' motivations for promoting parental involvement and how they do it. For example, reviewed literature revealed that teachers' fear of being judged, of losing their professional autonomy, or lack of time and absence of support from a responsive school principal constitute barriers to teacher-parent effective relationships (Grant & Ray, 2013). At the same time, it becomes relevant to have teachers express their expectations regarding parents as well as describe their own implemented practices and the facilitating conditions as well as the challenges they meet in doing so.

This research is in line with prior works on teacher burnout and teacher stress (Van der Wolf & Everaert, 2005). Thus, Van der Wolf et al.'s works on the stress experienced by teachers in connection with parents report excessive and contradictory demands from parents and little recognition obtained in return. The actual study also goes along with previous researches that dwelled on the impact of educational reforms on changes in the relationship between teachers and parents. For example, Driscoll (1998) argued that empowerment of parents and the path to teacher professionalization exacerbates existing conflicts between teachers and parents. Especially when parents are from privileged backgrounds, their power as clients can affect the autonomy of teachers. In Addi-Racah and Elyashiv-Arviv (2008)'s research, although teachers were supportive of parental involvement, they confessed to feeling vulnerable to the increased influence of parents and their intrusion into their professional field. Likewise, Baeck (2010)'s findings show that teachers try to keep well-educated parents at a distance in order to protect

their professional autonomy. It becomes thus imperative to unveil the conflicts arising (Ravn, 2005). One question is raised: What are the areas of tensions and inner contradictions that emerge in the school's teacher-parent relationships? Identifying these elements is likely to guide the teachers and the parents to engage in individual and collective transformation processes.

### Theoretical Frameworks

The present study is anchored in two main theoretical models: 1) Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2010) proposed model of the processes influencing teachers' motivation for school-family partnerships, and 2) the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2015). Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2010) proposed model suggests that teachers will foster collaborative relationships with parents in function of personal and contextual motivators and depending on some life context issues. Regarding personal motivators, teachers who believe that work with parents is part of their professional responsibilities, that they are expected to do so from both the school and the district leaders (*role construction*), and that they believe they can make a difference in actively supporting parents' involvement in students' learning (*self-efficacy*), they will more likely work in that direction. Likewise, if teachers perceive school and district policies that support school-family collaboration, as well as commitment from the school principal and a school culture that facilitates and values effective and collaborative teachers-parents relationships (*contextual motivators*), they will be more inclined to develop that way. As for the life context issues, if teachers are prepared to engage in collaborative relationships with parents, that is, if they have the knowledge, the skills and the allotted time to invest in such relationships, they will be more inclined to go ahead.

Even though all of the above processes might be at work for promoting collaborative relationships with parents, it doesn't mean that teachers will necessarily **engage in agency** to transform their work practices. In the light of CHAT, agency is broadly understood as encompassing almost any form of the human capacity to act intentionally (Engeström & Sannino, 2013). It is manifested when people form intentions and execute willful actions that go beyond and transform the accepted routines and given conditions of the activity and organization in

which they are involved (Engeström & Sannino, 2013). Another important aspect to consider is that agency happens when individuals ascribe new meaning to their activity in order to overcome a conflictual situation (Barma, 2008; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Interestingly enough, Barma, Lacasse and Massé-Morneau (2014) have documented that although teachers engage in agentive actions to modify their practice and feel comfortable about it, unexpected tensions coming from parents may rise when roles and routines are changed in the classroom. Increased in interactions and communication between teachers and parents might contribute to an increase in the possibility of tensions and conflicts (Barma et al., 2014; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Indeed, tensions tend to accumulate, to become systemic and recurrent and according to the theoretical framework of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and they are in fact the manifestations of dialectical contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Contradictions are at the core of CHAT and are understood as part of any human activity. They are never directly accessible to a researcher but if they remain uncovered and unresolved, they will paralyze the on-going transformative processes in one's professional activity (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). This is why we turn to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) in order to better understand how they can be overcome and foster agentive actions (Barma, 2011). CHAT has also at its central point of interest the concept of activity (Engeström, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Activity theory proposes that learning activities are human activities socially situated, for example in relation to the world of labour or that of learning. It is a theoretical framework that focuses on new forms of learning and social practices developed beyond the activity of isolated individuals, and considers the historicity of a collective process of transformation (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). CHAT emphasized the distinction between individual and collective activity, considered that labour is essentially cooperative and characterized by division of labour between the individuals forming a collective. Engeström (2015) developed a systemic triangular model to understand human collective activity (see Figure 1). The lower part of the triangle brings to light the essential mediating role played by the socio-institutional dimension of human activity as community members engage in the pursuit of a new activity, change their roles and the way labour is redistributed amongst them. In third

generation CHAT, an activity system is the unit of analysis and illustrates that human activity is goal-oriented and tool-mediated not only by individuals but also by collectives. Figure 1 presents the model of an activity system that is object-oriented, mediated by artefacts (instruments), community, rules and division of labour.

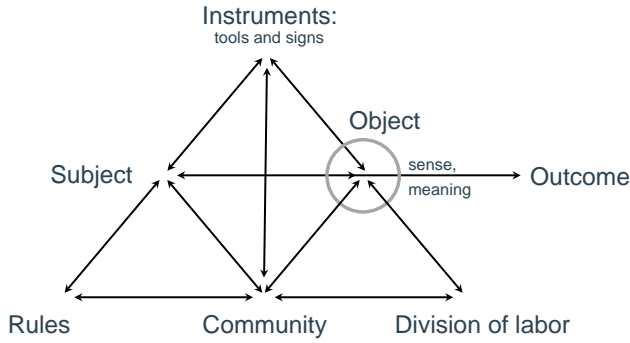


Figure 1. Model of a Collective Activity System (Engeström, 1987, p. 78).

In Quebec, the object of the activity of teachers is still defined by their ability to have students perform at provincial standardised tests and assess disciplinary content. But as a new curricular reform took place in 2001, the requirements changed asking teachers to engage in more collaborative relationships with parents (Deslandes & Barma, 2015). In the context of this paper, such a situation presupposes a dual existence between two opposing types of relationships between teachers and parents for the production of a new form of relationships between teachers and parents: work in separate spheres of influence versus overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2011). This is an example of a first level of contradiction i.e. in the production of a new form of activity.

The hypothesis we bring forward is the following one: since teachers appear to feel isolated and misunderstood, we wonder if parents act as clients or collaborators (Figure 2).

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**HYPOTHESIS OF CONTRADICTIONS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM OF THE TEACHERS' ACTIVITY**

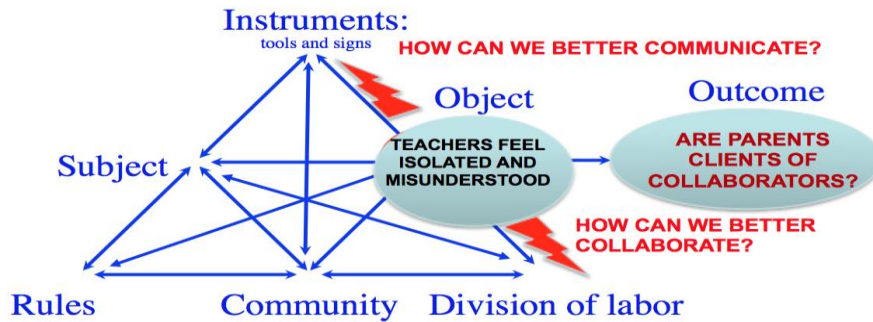


Figure 2. Hypothesis Regarding Teacher-Parent Relationships.

**Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify elementary and secondary teachers' perceptions of the various factors and processes that interact in their relationships with parents in general.
2. To document the facilitating conditions and the challenges they meet in their relationships with parents in the light of potential new instruments, rules or division of labor in their work environment, and
3. To identify the conditions necessary to put into place so teachers and parents engage

in reflecting on how they could better communicate and collaborate.

To reach the first objective, we'll rely on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s proposed model (2010) whereas to meet the second and third objectives, we'll build on the CHAT theoretical theory (Engeström, 2015).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited following an invitation by the president of the regional teacher union. Participants had to indicate their interest to the principal investigator. Inclusion criteria were: (1) to be a teacher either at the elementary or secondary level for at least 8 years, and (2) to have experienced at least one situation with a challenging student's parent. Exactly six teachers from the Mauricie-Centre-du-Québec region volunteered to participate in the study. Four participants were teaching at the elementary level and two, at the secondary level. Four of them were from rather privileged schools and two, from disadvantaged schools. All participants have been teaching for at least 10 years and none had received any training on school-family partnerships.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using six semi-structured individual interviews. The individual interview technique was chosen because it allows exchanges between the interviewees and the interviewer in order to deepen a phenomenon (Savoie-Zajc, 2004). The interview protocol is based on Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2010)'s proposed model of teachers' factors and processes of school-family collaboration. It consisted of two main sections, a first one on the socio-demographic characteristics, and a second one on the processes associated with teachers' motivations to support collaborative teacher-parent relationships. This last section included questions on (1) personal motivators, including their understanding of collaboration between teachers and parents, their role, their own practices and their expectations regarding parents' role; (2) contextual motivators such as the school principal and colleagues support for the development and the support of collaborative teacher-parent relationships, and (3) elements of their professional life context including questions about their knowledge, their skills and the allotted time and energy to work with parents.

### Procedures and Data Analysis

Individual interviews with an average duration of about 75 minutes were conducted by the principal investigator in one of the teachers' union rooms made available to the research team during the months of May and June 2014. The teachers came in after their school hours or during their free time. Participants were asked to sign a consent form to ensure that their participation was based on a voluntary basis. They were first informed of the privacy standards and approval of the conduct of the study by the Ethics Committee of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières through certificate number: CER -14-201-07.05. The analysis was performed using the software NVivo. Coding is mixed (L'Ecuyer, 1990), which means it was based on literature surrounding the sections of the interview protocol and illustrated in Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2010)'s proposed model while leaving out some room for new categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Following the analysis of transcripts, five categories of items appeared in the section related to teacher-parent relationships in general: personal and contextual motivators, life context issues, teachers' practices, perceived parents' practices and risk factors associated with teachers and with parents.

## Results

The findings of the study are first presented in line with Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s proposed model (2010). At a second level, some findings are being discussed in light of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2015).

### Personal Motivators

Subcategories include statements in connection with their understanding of teacher-parent collaborative relationships, their expectations regarding parents' role and the personal limits they have to apply.

Different definitions are suggested. For one participant, collaboration means "to be on the same wavelength (parents and teachers); to follow-up on the child's work (P1). For another, it is like teamwork (P2). Another participant highlights the sharing of information between the teachers and the parents and vice versa, and focuses on the importance of communication (P3).

As for their expectations regarding parents' role, teachers wish that they provide all the school supplies that the child needs so that he/she comes to school ready to learn (P1). They also wish that

parents show interest in their child's schooling, (success and difficulties), that they ask him/her questions about what went on at school, and that they accompany the child in his/her academic trajectories (P2, P5). They rely on parents to supervise homework, make sure homework is completed and handed in on time, and to motivate children / adolescents to go to school and to do well in school (P3, P6). They want parents to get in touch with the teacher if there is any kind of problem (P4).

For most teachers, expectations are rather traditional and more related to parental involvement in schooling at home and involvement in school projects. At the same time they recognize that working with parents is part of their professional responsibilities. However, they mention having sometimes to put some limits and let things go (P3, P4). In their opinion, parents in general are inclined to delegate to the teacher (P1).

### **Contextual Motivators**

This category includes the school principal support and school culture subcategories.

Regarding the first subcategory, the participants' comments are not consensus. Two of them say that they do not have the support of their school principal to promote collaborative teacher-parent relationships (P1, P2). One teacher explains:

*"They are good managers, but they have difficulty with parents. They do not want to deal with parents. [...] Do your job correctly. Inform them, but do not take your problems to the principals' office."* (P2)

As for the school culture, the "client approach" seems to predominate in many schools in the sense that they are more at the service of parents than of children. One participant evokes:

*"I think they find it important that we have a lot of communication with parents and that we keep a good record of everything [...]: that seems their first objective. I think they don't want to have to do with parents."* (P2)

According to the participants, many teachers do not really want more communication, more collaboration with parents because the latter ones tend to overprotect their child and because there

isn't enough support from the school principal (P2). A teacher states that everything depends on the bond of trust between the teacher and the parent and that some teachers simply don't want to work with the parents anymore (P6). Another one goes on saying that teachers don't have any contact with the parents anymore but at the same time, she claims that parents are too present in school (P1). Certainly, many teachers communicate a lot via email. For some, this is understood more as a protective measure for teachers (P3). A teacher deplores: "[...] I think something happened somewhere. Parents are taking up too much space in the school; they are too present "(P1). A rather pessimistic view of collaboration with parents emerges from the above comments characterized by the presence of contradictions: on one hand, parental involvement is expected, but on the other hand, parents are said to be too present.

### **Life Context Issues**

The elements of the professional life context are discussed in terms of time and energy and the perceived personal resources. Thus it happens that teachers refuse to promote collaboration with parents because of the heavy workload and lack of parent and principal support (P2). Two participants even say "that teachers do not believe in working with families anymore, it has now become too difficult, too heavy, it takes time" (P3, P5).

To work effectively with parents, teachers need to have self-confidence, a "strong" character, and to be diplomatic (P1, P2): "I think it takes a lot of self-confidence because parents constantly ask questions "(P1). The participants say that they have to learn to protect themselves and to admit their mistakes if any and to learn from them (P4). Active listening, knowledge of one's self and of one's limits and the ability to adapt and to make quick decisions are among other personal resources they deem important (P4, P5, P6). As strategies, they recommend presentation of specific facts, planning ahead, excellent knowledge of the curriculum and careful observation skills (P3, P6). They acknowledge, however, lacking the resources and the training to work well with parents (P1, P2).

### **Teachers' Practices**

This category relates mainly to the methods of communication being used with parents. The participants highlight the importance of

communication between teachers and parents to provide and exchange information and to motivate both the child and the parent (P2). For one teacher, communication is mainly conducted through email via the student-parent portal because of the need to keep traces, evidence, and to a lesser extent, by telephone (P2). Others mostly use the student agenda and the telephone (P1, P3, P4) and they make sure to take into account the reality of families' lives (availability, daily schedule). A teacher says to prefer to communicate by phone because human contact is crucial for her (P5). Another one uses the student-parent portal to make available to the parents her weekly work planning and her expectations regarding students' work (P6). This portal is an electronic platform usually located on the website of the school board that teachers are strongly urged to use to communicate with parents. One participant reveals: "The portal is helpful because it facilitates the follow-up by the parents" (P3). Another one summarizes:

*"It doesn't matter which communication modes are being used: student agenda, e-mail, phone call.... I try to respond as quickly as possible. It is done in a respectable and timely manner; [...] some parents think we are always sitting behind our computer screen..." (P6)*

### **Perceived Parents' Practices**

The participants have mixed feelings regarding the state of the situation in terms of teacher-parent relationships. Communication practices are at the heart of their comments. Their statements reflect different realities depending on the participants. One teacher says: "Usually, communication with the parent is going well." (P3). For another participant, it is just the opposite: parents never return her messages (P5). Moreover, a teacher working in disadvantaged areas reminds that she used to invite parents to come to school: "You come when you want. On my door, it says "open to parents"." It seems that not many parents showed up. (P6) A participant recalls that she invited a parent to read stories to the students. She was disappointed with the performance of the parent and felt uncomfortable because he didn't show any words or images. She has since given up on inviting parents in her classroom (P1).

For four teachers, communication with parents is more difficult and is far from being bidirectional.

For example, some parents do not check messages on the portal regularly. A participant complains that there is no feedback from parents, although most of them have the email address to communicate with the teacher (P2, P4). It seems that the situation is more problematic with parents of children having difficulty in school: "Parents don't return messages [...] and there is not a lot of requests to meet the teacher" (P3). Another one adds: "Communication is not there at all. It does not work. To be effective, it has to be on a frequent and continuous basis." (P5). Furthermore, despite the large quantity of informative messages sent home, teachers very rarely get thank you notes from the parents (P5). Other participants are outraged because some parents blame them when their child is not doing well in school. In some cases, participants say that parents do not help their children to take responsibility for school work and to consider school as a priority (P3, P5). It goes without saying that a low level of communication is often associated with a low level of parental involvement at least at the school level and in the school projects, as noted by the participants.

### **Risk Factors Associated with Teachers and Parents**

Some teachers' comments reflect exhaustion as in the case of curriculum with particular pedagogical projects (P6). The teachers' workload may be rather heavy and thus make them more vulnerable physically and mentally. Some participants think that the challenges linked to collaborative teacher-parent relationships are even more important when it comes to non-traditional families, especially since in their view, nearly a third of their students come from single-parent or stepfamilies (P6). In shared custody situations, the teacher must duplicate information to both parents' addresses available on the portal.

With respect to problematic parents, the parent as client is described by the participants as the parent who bothers them most, that is, who is troublesome. For instance, the parent client or customer goes first to the principal office when there is a problem instead of going to see the teacher: "They go to the school principal, they make their request. I feel like a salesperson in a store who should meet their demands, we're like a customer service "(P2). Four teachers mention both the overprotective parent as client who throws all the responsibility on the teacher and the school, and never on the child (P2, P3, P4,

P5). Often, these parents believe more in the fact version from their child than from the teacher: "The parent often takes the child's side" (P3, P6).

**Discussion**

Some of the most notable findings are now discussed in light of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). We have chosen to focus on the following areas of tensions according to the poles

of an activity system and their interactions, for example: 1) Issues of trust versus control when it comes to choosing communication tools and pathways of communication between the members of the school family community, and 2) issues related to the hierarchical status and power inside and outside the school when it comes to the redistribution of actions among the school community members. Figure 3 presents the points of interest that will be discussed.

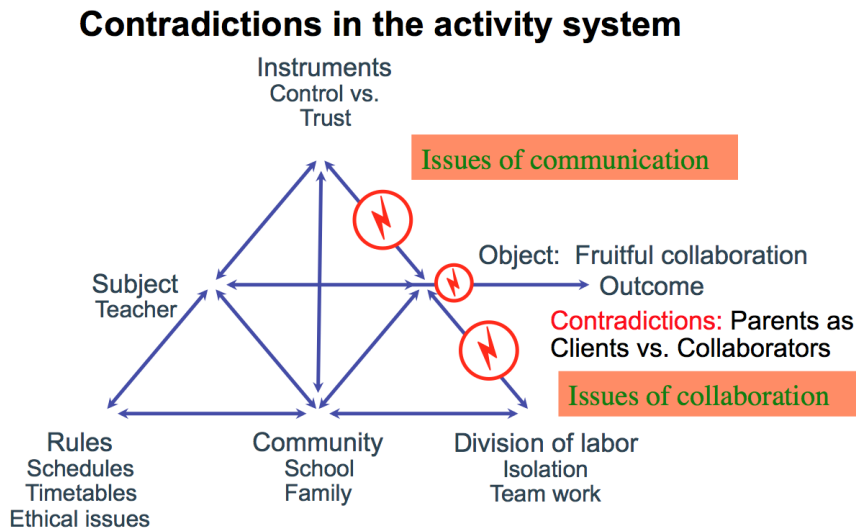


Figure 3. Salient Findings in Light of the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

**Issues of Communication**

Right from the start, this study puts into evidence the complexity of relationships between teachers and parents, given the multitude of factors and processes that interact. We first note that the design of the teacher-parent relationships converges especially towards the communication and transmission of information from school to home. This view is reflected in the teachers' expectations regarding parental support, expressed in terms of interest, supervision, motivation, etc. These words echo what parents had themselves stated in terms of parental involvement in a previous study that was conducted almost 15 years ago (Deslandes, 2003). Indeed, the study participants had described their involvement in terms of

interactions with the school, contribution to the motivation of the child, supervision as well as monitoring and prioritization of school work. So it seems that the school-family communication is still primarily unidirectional despite all the works showing the compelling nature of reciprocity and bi-directionality in communication in order to foster collaborative relationships between teachers and parents (e.g., Deslandes, 2010; Epstein, 2011; Glasgow & Whitney, 2009; Grant & Ray, 2013; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). There has been a trend over the years of teachers' obligation to define some parameters of their professional role alleging "too big shoveling in their yard" by parents. These comments are consistent with, among others, the works of Van der Wolf and Everaert (2005) indicating the sometimes



unrealistic expectations on the part of some parents and the pressure put on teachers while contributing to the increase of their stress. They are also in line with Ravn's (2005) comments regarding teachers' and parents' necessity to share their expectations.

In the light of CHAT analysis, the members of the school family community have to have a shared vision of what a collaborative relationship means to all of them. If parents consider themselves clients, then the contradiction in the activity of communicating will not be resolved and the teachers who will keep on feeling not trusted and isolated (see Figure 3).

Under the heading of contextual motivators, the collected perceptions suggest a lack of consensus on the issue of support or not from the school principal. Note a greater predominance of the lack of school principal support. The participants' comments correspond to the findings of studies showing on one hand, the importance of principals in giving support to teachers in their work with parents and in facilitating the development of trusting relationships with them (Cankar et al. 2009; Deslandes, Fournier, & Rousseau, 2005; Olender, Elias, & Mastroleo, 2010) and on the other hand, those that highlight the fact that some seem to have chosen to give priority to the principle of clientelism (Addi-Racah & Elyashiv-Arviv, 2008; Baeck, 2010; Ravn, 2005). In these circumstances, the role of mediator of the school administrator becomes marginal and while being pressured by some parents, he/she can hardly provide the support expected by the teachers (Glasgow & Whitney 2009). We postulate that these school administrators legitimize their low provision of support by the need to preserve their own status and their own credibility with their employer or the district school board at least in the context of the province of Quebec. In that light, the division of labor between the different members of the school family community has to be clarified. Are school principals imputable to parents or are they supposed to support teachers in their professional responsibilities regarding work with parents? (see Figure 3)

With respect to a more tangible aspect of the instruments used to communicate with each other, the results put into light a large repertory of them but at the same time one needs to focus on how and when they are to be used. Within the professional life context and risk factors associated with teachers, while putting forward

communication with parents as the most important practice, participants acknowledge not having enough time, enough resources and enough training to work well therewith. Certainly they appear to use a variety of means of communication ranging from parent-student portal, e-mail, student agenda, memos and phone calls. According to some participants, means of communication are also seen as ways to keep traces in the event of any problems with parents. However, feedback and words of appreciation from parents are extremely rare. This lack of recognition appears to have a deleterious effect on the motivation of certain teachers. In addition, teachers complain that the consistency in communication is not present. This finding goes against the recommendations in many scientific papers on the need for clear, frequent and timely communication between teachers and parents (e.g., Epstein, 2011; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014). In sum, in the current study, communication with parents appears to be mostly one-way and for certain teachers, it is not only a way to discuss the students' progress and difficulties, but also a way to protect themselves in case of recriminations from parents. In the light of CHAT, we see two opposing forces at hand: trust versus control.

### **Issues of Collaboration**

The client approach is also discussed by the vast majority of participants in their relationships with parents, under the angle of rules to be established. Parents too present, excessive demands, need for trust, these are words that corroborate data from previous works (Addi-Racah & Elyashiv-Arviv, 2008; Addi-Racah & Einhorn, 2009; Baeck, 2010) indicating discomfort among teachers caused by a greater power of specially, parents from privileged backgrounds who are usually more highly educated than other parents. According to Opltakea (2002, cited in Addi-Racah & Elyashiv-Arviv, 2008), these parents are more likely to act as customers. It is thus not surprising, as reported by the participants, that these parents function as clients (Ravn, 2005), that is, they bypass teachers and prefer to speak directly to the principal, which is thereby a perceived threatening approach in the eyes of teachers. It is possible that this power, felt more importantly in affluent settings translate the frantic pace of everyday life leaving parents with very little time to exchange with teachers. In the light of our analysis based on CHAT, we see a

contradiction in the division of labor: parents and teachers working in silo or choosing to work as a team? As another explanation, we could add the individualistic perspective from the parents' viewpoint at the expense of other students as a group in the same classroom (Deslandes, 2012; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). This individualistic vision is reflected especially in the client and overprotective parent who sometimes show mistrust towards the teacher. As noted by participants, this mistrust leads the parent to give more credibility to the child's version of events than to that of the teacher. Needless to say that countless studies have shown that the link of trust between teachers and parents is vital to collaborative school-family relationships and that it will necessarily impact on the way they share the different tasks between each other (e.g., Deslandes, 2006a, 2010; Deslandes et al., 2005; Epstein, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Westergard, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

This study stands out in its originality in the use of two complementary theoretical perspectives, Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2010) proposed model of the processes influencing teachers' motivation for school-family partnerships, and 2) the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engestrom, 2015) that allows unveiling manifestations of tensions and contradictions that need to be addressed, thus facilitating transformative practices. Both models aim at deepening our understanding of complex human activities. The targeted outcome shared by the two models is the following object: collaborative teachers-parents relationships.

It should be mentioned that the study has limitations that make it impossible to generalize the findings. These relate to the small size of the sample, to the great diversity of experience of the participants, of the contexts in which they work and the multiplicity of factors and processes that interact in relationships between teachers and parents. However, we stipulate that the data collection instrument, that is, the individual interviews conducted under the cover of anonymity, potentially provided an opportunity to the participants to open up and make statements, reveal ideas, that they would not have dared to express in other circumstances.

This study shows that despite the advancement of knowledge on factors and processes related to

collaborative relationships between teachers and parents, there are still and will always be elements that may contribute to tensions and dilemmas. It is necessary to admit that tensions and dilemmas are inevitable. Our results point in a particular way some elements that contribute to complicate relations between teachers and parents.

First, there is this perception of mercantile ideology of the school that has emerged in several Québec schools representing parents as consumers, hence the name of the client approach. Focus on accountability for results, implementation of specific projects in schools, competition between schools, these are all measures put forward in order to better meet the customer needs. In a context of mercantile culture, it is not surprising that school principals choose to support above all parents in their recriminations, at the expense of teachers.

As a promising avenue for intervention and developmental research, we suggest to apply the Change Laboratory method based on CHAT. This method relies on collaborative learning and transformation of work activities or practices (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). In the current situation, it aims at building on collaborative transformative agency based on a new understanding of the teacher-parent relationships and a new vision of its future development. Through the use of mirror data, the Change Laboratory method will allow the resolution of obstacles or barriers understood as discursive manifestations of contradictions in the discourse of the teachers and parents.

Here a few elements that could become the starting points of a dialogue within the Change Laboratory sessions. For instance, it appears imperative to increase the awareness of school administrators to the importance of deploying with the teachers a leadership style that is based on humanist values characterized by "caring, empathy, encouragement and reinforcement". It is important not to wait for a political will at the provincial level, but to go forward with school principals who already provide support to their teachers in the work with parents and to hope for a snowball effect. It is also vital to better support parents in their parenting role and to sensitize them to the importance of prioritizing their children's schooling.

This culture of clientelism seems to give more power to parents than they had in the past and to open the door to greater expectations and greater demands on the part of the whole society. It is a

fertile ground for excessive requests and mistrust in the relationships between teachers and parents that are amplified by performance requirements and challenges associated with diverse family structures and situations. It is no longer just a dichotomy between advantaged and disadvantaged families but it is about conditions involving several risk factors interacting with each other and with processes.

To create highly trusty links between teachers and parents, schools and teachers must explore the possibility to promote "repeated contacts as during meetings, face-to-face interviews, discussions, telephone conversations, written comments, participation in educational activities, social or other" (Deslandes 2006b, p. 161)

Once again, it is an illusion to think that we will overcome or eliminate any possible dilemma between teachers and parents. There will always

be different types of parents who pose additional challenges for teachers. It is likely that these challenges will increase in number in time of political austerity era as announced by the current provincial government while service cuts are already planned regarding students having difficulties. Furthermore, there are no guides, no programs or ready-made kits with key in hand regarding the development of collaborative relationships between teachers and parents, but rather general principles to which partners, teachers and parents are invited to adhere (Deslandes, 2012). We must not forget that students and their parents are constantly changing in function of student age and student school trajectory. As time goes by, so do students and their parents. Everything has to be done all over again, all the time.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Claudia Cousin, president of the regional teachers' union [Syndicat des Vieilles Forges] who gave us access to a room in order to conduct the interviews. We are also very thankful to all the teachers who agreed to take part in the study. Our thanks go to Marie-Hélène Bergeron, a professional agent, for helping us in some parts of the study. The first two authors are regular members of the Center for Research and Intervention Regarding School Success (CRIRES).

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