

Teachers' First Meeting with Groups of Parents of Elementary Students at the Beginning of the School Year: Parents' Expectations and Responses to these Expectations.

Isabelle Bergeron

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

Rollande Deslandes

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

This study examines the expectations of parents of elementary students with respect to the information evenings at the beginning of school year. The expectations are discussed in terms of welcoming, exchange of information and perceptions of the development of trust with their child's teacher. Data collection was conducted with eight parents of fifth grade in the course of two interviews conducted with each participant, one before the group meeting, and a second one, a few days after. The results indicate that parents expect a warm and individualized reception, and information on strategies to support learning and work at home. Parents reported that there was no group discussion or exchange at the meeting which also did not serve to establish norms of collaboration based on educational goals or to identify actions aiming to develop the sharing of responsibilities. Parents, however, said that their child's teacher inspires trust. Avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Meeting with groups of parents, Parents' expectations, Teachers' responses, Elementary level.

Context

Collaboration between the school and the parents is important for maximizing a student's chances of success. Collaboration among the various partners, for its part, is based on the relationship of trust that characterizes positive relations. This type of parent-teacher relationship, however, is built up during meetings over time. Now, few parent-teacher meetings are held at the elementary level, although these are more frequent than at the secondary level. Generally speaking, there are three: the information evening at the start of the school year, which is a collective event; an individual meeting at the time of the first report card; and a final meeting, later in the year, with the parents of students having difficulties. All three are indicated in the Act respecting the process of negotiation of the collective agreements in the public and parapublic sectors (R.S.Q., Chapter R-8.2).

Given the small number of meetings, it is essential, at the very least, to ensure that the first contact between parents and teachers initiates the relationship of trust. According to Deslandes (2004a), "among the effective strategies implemented for inviting families to participate, the first positive contact with parents heads the list, and its value must not, above all, be underestimated." (p.18). As a result, it seems crucial to have these relations get off on the right foot, which makes the following questions relevant: What do parents expect from this first group encounter? What knowledge must teachers mobilize for this evening? Our study focuses on a reading of parents' needs, takes a look at the first contact between teacher and parent and examines the impacts of this contact on the development of a relationship of trust.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Isabelle Bergeron, e-mail: isabellebergeron_13@hotmail.com

Review of the literature

Information evening and the relationship of trust

Our review of writings on the subject of back-to-school night and parents' evenings reveals that very little research has been done on this dimension of professional practice. One of the rare was conducted in England in 1998 with the teachers, parents and students of four secondary schools in Norfolk; it demonstrated that unsatisfactory assessment is often due to confusion in the role of participants, each group having its own viewpoints and agendas. What is the state of the situation in schools in Québec?

As a general rule, the information evening is defined as a collective evening event held at the start of the year by elementary and secondary schools. It allows parents to meet their child's teacher or teachers and usually includes the following elements: information about programs; explanations about the school's rules and functioning; expectations regarding homework in terms of quantity and type of work; examples of learning approaches and strategies; and information on special projects and educational and recreational outings (Caron, 1994; Heyda, 2002; MEQ, 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Christenson and Sheridan (2001) consider the information evening as an opportunity for the families and school to share responsibilities. Jonson (2002), for her part, affirms that the primary goal of this meeting, as with the others, is to develop a relationship of trust. Now, Deslandes, Rousseau and Fournier (2005) found that parents tend to have greater trust in teachers than the other way around, especially if the relationship is a good one.

Positive school-family relationship

Christenson and Sheridan (2001) have identified four essential process variables for positive school-family relationships: approach, attitudes, atmosphere and actions. The rubric 'approach' includes key elements with respect to children's learning, for example, sharing common goals viewed as important by both the family and the school and a belief that working together as partners is beneficial. Attitudes characteristic of positive relationships involve, among other things, an understanding of the needs, ideas, opinions and viewpoints of families and educators. A congenial, respectful atmosphere, one of inclusion and support for all children and their families, as

well as the parents' confidence in the school and the school's in the parents are further elements that testify to a positive relationship. Actions aimed at developing shared responsibilities also enhance the relationship of trust. The greeting extended to parents and the ensuing exchanges acquire all their importance during the first parent-teacher meeting.

Welcome and trust. Since the welcome is a key element in the development of positive school-family relationships, it is important for teachers to greet parents with enthusiasm and multiply the opportunities to meet with them (Browman, 1999; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Deslandes & Jacques, 2004; Smolkin, 1999). A parent who is warmly received may react in different ways, including feeling that his presence is desired and that he is a key actor in his child's education. Various gestures are recommended, for example, an enthusiastic greeting, a friendly smile, a handshake, etc. (Bagin, 2000; Caron, 1994; Deslandes, 2004a). Before the meeting, an invitation is often formulated, which is part of the welcome. It is likewise necessary to plan for an arrangement that fosters the welcome and subsequent exchanges. Supplying a document for the meeting shows that teachers have prepared for it and, consequently, that the meeting and the parents are important to them (Bagin, 2000; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Exchanges and trust. Margolis and Brannigan (1986) hold that building a relationship of trust between the school and the families is in interactive process involving the sharing of information, ideas and feelings. The school must set the tone, extend an invitation to collaborate, employ strategies allowing for two-way communication and structure interactions that render parental input necessary (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2011). To this end, Weiss and Edwards (1992) suggest that teachers use stimulating questions during the information evening to allow participants to engage in a reciprocal dialogue regarding the school.

Professional and personal qualities and relationship of trust

Teacher's qualities, both professional and personal, influence the development of the relationship of trust. Professional competencies refer to the capacity to provide students with clear explanations, identify their learning needs, arrange interventions based on didactic and pedagogical knowledge, offer parents effective

tools for intervention, etc. (Deslandes et al., 2005). The personal qualities expected of a teacher include a love for children, a passion for teaching, gentleness, rigour and a positive attitude (Deslandes et al., 2005). Other personal skills include the ability to establish an interpersonal relationship with the parent by focusing on the child and a capacity for demonstrating empathy, authenticity and benevolence (Deslandes, 2001, 2004b; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Deslandes, Jacques, Doré-Côté & Belanger, 2004).

In light of the works reviewed, our research objectives include: (1) identifying parents' expectations of the teacher in terms of the welcome, information and exchanges experienced during the information evening; (2) verifying to what extent the information evening met parents' initial expectations; and (3) exploring parents' perception of their new relationship with their child's teacher.

Method

Participants

The sample is composed of eight parents of fifth-grade students: five women and three men. Half of the group has a boy in fifth grade and the other half, a girl. This grade level was chosen because parents apparently have greater trust in the teacher at the start of their child's school career, a confidence that appears to diminish as the child advances through school (Deslandes et al., 2005). The participants were chosen from a bank prepared by a community of parents, in this case the parental participation organization (PPO) and the governing board (GB). Five of the eight children live in a traditional family, two are part of a blended family and one is in shared custody. One parent had taken a course of professional studies in high school (12.5% of the sample), two had attended college (25%) and five had been to university (62.5%). All the parents stated they did not know their child's teacher, or that they knew her by name only, which made them eligible for the research.

Data collection

Data were collected by means of individual interviews in two stages. A first meeting was held in the week prior to the information evening for each of the eight participants; about 40 minutes in length, it dealt solely with expectations regarding this evening. The second encounter, during the week following the information evening, focused

on the second and third research objectives and lasted about 30 minutes. The interviews took place in mid-September and were recorded for purposes of analysis. Two directed interview protocols were developed. They include one section on the welcome, a second on personal and professional qualities, a third on the content of the information evening and a final one on the exchanges. The protocols were validated with a non-participating parent from the governing council to ensure question comprehension.

Data processing

The directed interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by coding and calculation of reliability. The coding chosen is mixed in nature; it includes a closed set of rubrics, determined by the conceptual framework, and an open set of categories based on a temporary list (L1), which was modified, completed and reduced during the analysis (L2 and L3), resulting in a stabilized list (L4). The process was based on the steps suggested by Van der Maren (1995). An interjudge agreement of 92% was obtained during data coding, thus exceeding the 70% minimum index set by Miles and Huberman (1991).

Findings and Discussion

The presentation of findings is divided into five rubrics: welcome, information, exchanges, teacher's professional and personal qualities and goals of the information evening. Each rubric is divided into pre- and post-evening information. Findings are discussed in the form of an analysis relative to the framework of reference and are presented after each rubric.

Welcome

Parents' expectations of the welcome: findings for the pre-information evening.

Close to 28 units of meaning were collected for the open question: 'Upon your arrival at the information evening, the teacher welcomes you...'. The categorization highlighted five codes and subcodes with an average of two expectations for fathers and four for mothers. The parents want the teacher to greet them at the entrance to the classroom, introduce herself, offer a handshake, ask the name of their child and indicate the child's desk. They also expect to find a teacher with a warm attitude and personal skills who cares about parents and is pleased to see them.

TEACHERS' FIRST MEETING WITH GROUPS OF PARENTS

Table 1

Gesture and words used to welcome parents at the entry to class. Balance between expectation and responses to expectation.

Participants 'codes	Gestures	Would you say the teacher met your expectations?	Words	Would you say the teacher met your expectations?
P.104 - MPS	No, because all the parents arrived at the same time	No	None	No
P.101 - FU	None	No, no personal introduction upon entering	A collective greeting	No
P.102 - FU	1) Handshake 2) Assigned a place: child's desk	Yes, received a proper greeting	Welcome to each one Words on the chalkboard: "Welcome"	Yes
P.109 - MU	1) Handshake	Yes	"Good evening" upon entering the classroom	Yes
P.200 - FC	2) Assigned a place: child's desk 1) Handshake	Yes	"What is your child's name?"	Yes
P.107 - MC	2) Assigned a place: child's desk 1) No gesture 2) Words of greeting	Yes, because I was expecting a collective welcome	A collective word of "welcome" Presented a little kitten to give away	Yes, it was very nice
P.103 - FU	1) Welcome near the doorway 2) Handshake 3) Warm smile 4) Look	Yes	A warm "good evening" Invitation to come in	Yes
P.106 - FU	1) Handshake 2) Smile	Yes	Said "hello"	Yes

It appeared that two of the eight parents were not welcomed in accordance with initial expectations (no personalized welcome). The participants explained the absence of words and gestures of greeting as follows: "We were at a meeting in the gym, then when it was time to go to the classrooms, everybody arrived at the same time." "It was a substitute, a girl who just got out of University." Table 1 presents the gestures and words as well as the opinion of the parents in terms of response to expectations. Thus, the

presence of desired words and gestures led to satisfaction, with the reverse being true as well.

Parents' perception of the relationship between welcome and trust: findings for the pre-information evening.

To the question: 'In your opinion, can the kind of welcome you receive influence your feeling of confidence in this teacher? Explain.' Six participants answered 'yes', one 'probably' and one 'no.' For those who responded in the

affirmative, the reasons given were divided into four categories of equal importance: 1) The welcome gives an idea of what the teacher's attitude will be to the children; 2) The teacher's attitude lets parents see if their child will feel at ease with the teacher; 3) When first meetings are friendly, the rest of the year proceeds smoothly; and 4) A warm welcome inspires trust. The participant who answered 'probably' specified that 1) the parent is willing to give the teacher a chance and 2) the work to be done during the year is of greater importance. The participant who answered 'no' did not offer an explanation.

Parents' perception of the relationship between welcome and trust: findings for the post-information evening.

After the information evening, everyone stated that the kind of welcome received impacts the development of the relationship of trust. Six of the eight participants had their perceptions confirmed. The others had a change of view: thanks to their positive experience, they now said that the welcome influenced their trust in the teacher.

Discussion of findings.

Thus, parents' expectations regarding the teacher's manner of welcoming them during the information evening corresponds to those identified in the work of Deslandes (2004a), who states that during information evenings and open doors, "Regardless of the number of participants, each one must feel important. Each must be warmly welcomed: a smile, a handshake, a sincere greeting, a welcome committee that orients the participants in the establishment [...]" (p. 17). More parent participants expressed a wish for an individual, rather than a group, welcome, and the mothers verbalized a higher number of expectations than the fathers. After the information evening, several participants said these words and gestures had been forthcoming. However, when the teacher begins the meeting without a personal acknowledgement at the entrance to the classroom, the parent receives a poorer impression. Again with respect to the welcome, participants stated after the meeting that a satisfactory response to expectations influences their trust in the teacher. These findings comply with those of Christenson and Sheridan (2001), who argue that a warm, respectful and positive atmosphere and climate along with parents' trust in the school and the school's in the parents are the characteristics of a

positive relationship. Apparently, the first impression must again be taken into account during other situations of initial contact such as the information evening.

Information

Parents' expectations in terms of information: findings for the pre-information evening.

Twenty-six units of meaning were collected for the open question: 'Regarding the information that will be communicated this evening, do you feel that any particular subjects are essential?' The categorization highlighted thirteen codes. Several parents had the shared expectation of receiving information about homework (how to help my child), while male participants were more interested in learning about the code of discipline in the classroom. It's important to note the absence of units of meaning for the presentation of teaching materials that the teacher and child are to work with; this subject, however, consumes a lot of time during many information meetings at the primary level.

Response to parents' expectations in terms of information: findings for the post-information evening.

One participant out of eight expressed dissatisfaction with the information conveyed. The participant said this was because of the absence of information on teaching methods, the presence or absence of a work team and the implementation of reform. He specified he received information on homework, the school agenda as a method of communication, the system of discipline in class and the school materials used.

Parents' perception of the relationship between information and trust: findings for the pre-information evening.

To the question: 'Can the information conveyed influence your trust in your child's teacher? Explain.' The participants' comments are grouped into two codes: information and attitude. Information includes units of meaning that refer to complete and diversified details. Attitude includes those that refer to the teacher's personality. Three significant passages establish a link between information and trust when the information is complete and diversified: "If the teacher moves beyond purely technical details: discipline, organization, routine. I think my trust will be

greater if the teacher really talks about teaching, about the way she views teaching." Ten significant passages refer to the teacher's personality. The teacher's attitude, apparently, is a more decisive factor in terms of the parent's inclination to feel confident in her or not. "It's more her attitude that determines if I have trust in her." "It's more the way she gives the information than the information as such."

Discussion of findings.

The literature shows that parents view the teacher's presentation of learning approaches and strategies as *very important*. According to Terrisse, Larose, Lefebvre and Bédard (2005), parents have key expectations in terms of training, more so than for information; they are, that is, more interested in acquiring skills rather than knowledge to better fulfil their roles and functions as educators. Deslandes and Bertrand (2003) point out that another way to help parents gain a greater sense of competence is by regularly sending home examples of specific strategies that yield results in specific situations. The findings of the present study show that parents want to receive such examples of learning strategies. The literature already notes that homework, identified as *very important*, is a pivotal issue (Deslandes, 2004b, 2009; MEQ, 2001). The parent participants want to know what homework will be like, how much time their child should devote to it and how they, as parents, can help. Participants demonstrate less interest in knowing why the teacher chose teaching as a profession. At the same time, these parents note the passion that animates the teacher (rubric *Personal and professional qualities*). In terms of the code of discipline in the classroom, as several authors point out (Caron, 1994; MEQ, 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992), parents find it *important* for the teacher to provide explanations about the rules, routines and functioning of the school. This research, although based on a very small sample, reveals that this particular request comes mainly from the fathers.

Based on the significant passages collected, the teacher's attitude appears to be a more decisive factor in the parent's inclination to accord trust or not, more so than the information dispensed during the evening. Parents expect complete, diversified details, but as far as the relationship of trust is concerned, the teacher's attitude is the key. Studies previously conducted reveal similar data. For example, according to Christenson and

Sheridan (2001), parents would like more personal - even less professional - interactions with the school. Deslandes (2004b) sums this rubric up well by stating that trust in the teacher as an individual is built upon interpersonal relationships. Such trust develops, especially, within the context of meetings that allow for information sharing on children's progress, needs and interests, the establishment of a goal for their education, and the communication of information to parents on the school's expectations regarding their child's work and behaviour.

Exchanges

Parents' expectations in terms of exchanges: findings for the pre-information evening.

Exactly 14 units of meaning were identified for the question 'Do you want a parent-teacher exchange to be included in the schedule?' Three codes emerged: 1) the question period, 2) group discussions, and 3) individual discussions. All the parents interviewed believe a question period is important to, among other things, clarify various elements and introduce a forgotten or neglected subject. As well, it seems important to set aside time for group discussions in order to share views and experiences, reflect on aspects brought up by the other parents, offer one's point of view on the functioning of the class and evaluate the teacher's degree of openness.

Response to parents' expectations in terms of exchanges: findings for the post-information evening.

The teachers apparently functioned in a similar manner during the exchanges. All the parents took part in a question period that lasted from 2 to 15 minutes. Regarding the length of time, seven out of eight declared themselves satisfied and one parent found it too short, although she was satisfied with the answers she received. She specifies that "My dissatisfaction is more in the sense that I didn't feel there was a proposal of an exchange period." One mother wrote a message to the teacher and received a written response in the next few days. Two other mothers stayed after the meeting to have a private conversation, which they were granted. Two parents specified that the meeting had lasted less than an hour and said they were satisfied with that.

Discussion of findings.

The participants were allowed a question period. There were no group discussions. Some authors point out that it is up to the teacher to initiate topics for discussion, if this is desired (Christenson & Sheridan 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). In the pre-evening information interview, three parents said they also wanted exchanges among the parents. Now, the elements identified by Christenson and Sheridan (2001) that contribute to the development of positive school-family relationships include an understanding of the needs, ideas, opinions and viewpoints of families and educators. Such an understanding, however, is more easily achieved during an exchange rather than a question period.

Teachers' personal and professional qualities

Parents' expectations regarding the teacher's personal and professional qualities: findings for the pre-information evening.

The following task was requested: *Here is a set of personal and professional qualities that your child's teacher may demonstrate during the information evening. Indicate how important it is for you to observe these qualities during this first meeting.* Exactly 16 statements were then presented to the participants, and parents evaluated the importance of each on a scale of 0 to 3. The qualities participants viewed as very important were: *Demonstrates that the child is her main focus* and *Displays a passion for her profession*. All 16 qualities were considered important to some degree (see Table 2 in appendix 1). It must be emphasized that all the personal qualities were viewed as important and very important.

Parents' perception of the relationship of attitudes and behaviours to confidence and trust: findings for the pre-information evening.

The parents named almost 21 elements as attitudes and behaviours having a positive impact on the relationship of trust. These were classified into three categories: personal, professional and knowledge skills. For the first one, 13 units of meaning were pinpointed, six for the second and two for the third. Personal skills predominated. It must be recalled, however, that the question dealt with attitudes and behaviours and therefore did not favour the emergence of units of meaning

relative to knowledge. Certain participants also named attitudes that, in their opinion, could hinder the development of the relationship of trust. Such attitudes were described as cold, closed to suggestions, rigid and controlling.

Response to parents' expectations regarding the teacher's personal and professional qualities and their perception of the trust accorded the teacher: findings for the post-information evening.

The teachers demonstrated a good number of the personal and professional qualities named by the parents during the first interview. Based on the teacher's attitude, parents also perceived how she was going to interact with their child on a daily basis. The participants said that the teacher before them loved children and was patient, friendly, organized, focused on children and professional, also, that she operated on the basis of rewards rather than punishments, respected the child's rhythm of learning, was open to discussions and explained clearly how homework should be done. Additional elements that had not been mentioned as desirable during the first interview were identified and revealed to be highly valued during this meeting. Thus, participants observed the following characteristics: self-assurance, integrity, sympathy, child-centeredness, poise, experience, soft-spokenness, emphasis on learning rather than grades, interest in the child's development as a first priority, values similar to their own, motivation and the presentation of stimulating projects for the children. To the question: 'Did the teacher display the personal and professional qualities you hoped to see?' There were six enthusiastic 'yeses', one hesitant 'yes' and one 'no.' The reasons for the hesitant 'yes' and the 'no' are: the teacher tended to repeat herself, she was stressed, she appeared ill at ease, she contradicted what she had just said to make a concession to a parent and "it's her first year of teaching."

To the question: 'Would you say this person inspires trust?' For six of the eight parents, the teacher inspires trust, whereas the response is mitigated for one and negative for the other. Three of the four teachers demonstrated qualities and adopted behaviours that pleased the parent participants, and this produced an initial sense of confidence.

Discussion of findings.

The findings for the information evening clearly establish that it is important for the teacher to *demonstrate that the child is her main focus* and *display a passion for her profession*. These data correspond to the findings of the study by Deslandes et al., (2005) presented above. Compared with professional qualities, the teacher's personal qualities take precedence. By developing her interpersonal skills, the teacher will be better able to meet parents' needs since, according to Christenson and Sheridan (2001), parents seek more personal, rather than professional, interactions with the school. This information regarding the qualities of the teacher and her relationship with the parents enhances the value of the data collected in the scientific literature. It must be pointed out that the knowledge and skills already listed in the studies - for example, the capacity to give a student clear explanations, identify his or her learning needs, etc. - are harder to observe during a first meeting (Deslandes, 2004b; Deslandes et al., 2005). Others, such as the capacity to establish interpersonal relations with the parent by focusing on the child, talking about the progress, needs and interests of the child; demonstrating empathy, and displaying authenticity and benevolence (Deslandes, 2001, 2004b; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Deslandes, Jacques, & Doré-Côté, 2004) are the personal qualities the participants seek. At the same time, the study reveals that teaching interventions that are rigid, cold, controlling and closed to suggestions as well as repetitive and contradictory hinder the development of the relationship of trust. This rubric reveals that the information evenings attended by the parents questioned produced a feeling of confidence in the teacher for almost seven parents out of eight.

Goals of the information evening

Parents' perception of the goals of the information evening: findings for the pre-information evening.

Exactly 23 units of meaning were collected for the open questions 'As a parent, explain in a few words your view of this evening's goals and objectives' and 'Do you have other expectations to communicate regarding this evening's information or teacher?' The categorization highlighted nine codes: six goals and three additional expectations. In the parents' opinion, the goals of the

information evening are to establish a first contact between the teacher and parent (discover the teacher's personality, match up names and faces), anticipate how the school year will unfold, discuss the parent's role in accompanying his or her child, instil trust in the parents, describe the functioning of the school and communicate information. Three other expectations that emerged from the second question are: 1) that there be good chemistry between the teacher and the parents (2 units), 2) that parents be allowed to convey information about their child either in writing or during an individual meeting at the end of the evening (2 units), and 3) that the meeting to be brief (2 units). Two participants indicated that, despite the term *information evening*, information is less important than the positive contact between the parent and teacher.

Parents' satisfaction with the information evening: findings for the post-information evening.

Findings show a high rate of satisfaction regarding parents' view of the evening's goals. Seven parents rated the meeting satisfactory (with six finding it very satisfactory) and one parent found it unsatisfactory. Overall, parents were pleased their expectations had been met and felt the evening's goals had been achieved.

Agreement between parents' satisfaction with the information evening and development of the relationship of trust.

All in all, when their expectations are met, parents are inclined to accord the teacher trust; in the opposite case, they have difficulty doing this. The sense of trust, as presented in the above rubric, is present in six of the eight participants, mitigated in one and absent in the other.

Discussion of findings.

Some of the goals of the information evening identified by the parents have already been mentioned in the scientific literature. For example, when participants speak about the importance of understanding the parent's role in accompanying her child, they echo Christenson and Sheridan (2001) regarding the actions to implement to create and support the roles of each relative to the child's learning. This goal, within the context of the information evening, can be seen as a first step in responsibility sharing. The school-family partnership espoused by Christenson and Sheridan (2001) is a process that is at once more

complex, richer and more involving. As suggested by Epstein (2011) and Weiss and Edwards (1992), the school staff then has the opportunity to establish norms of collaboration based on educational goals very early in their relationship with the parents. The parent participants, however, do not appear to have contributed to the development of norms of communication. Among the other goals mentioned is that of establishing a first positive contact between the parents and the teacher, which corresponds to the statement by Deslandes (2004a). An additional key goal for several parents is to instil confidence in parents and establish a relationship of trust, therefore supporting Jonson's view (2002) that the first goal of this encounter, as for the others, is to develop a relationship of trust.

Conclusion

This study examines the expectations of parents of elementary students regarding the information evening at the start of the school year. It explores, in particular, parents' expectations in terms of welcome, information and exchanges along with their perceptions of the development of a relationship of trust and confidence with their child's teacher. In fact, positive relations set the stage for the establishment of confidence between parents and educators. The key concepts of this research rest on the four major themes proposed by Christenson and Sheridan (2001) – approach, attitudes, atmosphere and actions. The approach consisted of examining the perception of eight parents of fifth-grade students before and after the information evening. The first research question proposed discovering parents' expectations of the teacher in terms of welcome, information and exchanges, the teacher's personal and professional qualities and the goals of the information evening. Findings indicate that the parent participants expect the welcome to be warm and personal: they want to be greeted at the door to the classroom, be welcomed by the teacher (whether as a group or individually), and have the teacher introduce herself, offer a handshake, ask the identity of their child and indicate the child's desk. The participants believe it is very important for the teacher to present approaches and strategies for support to learning during the information evening to better equip them for accompanying their child in his or her learning process. They also point out that it is very

important to receive information about homework. The participants wanted, and received, a question period during the information evening. However, there were no group discussions or exchanges during this encounter. Regarding expectations in terms of attitudes, findings establish clearly that it is important for the teacher to demonstrate that the child is her main focus and that she is passionate about her profession. As for the creation of a relationship of trust, the determining factor is the teacher's attitude, not informational content. In the parents' opinion, the goals of the information evening are to: 1) establish a first contact between the teacher and parent, 2) give an idea of how the year will unfold, 3) instruct them about their role in accompanying the child, 4) instil trust in the teacher, 5) explain the functioning of the class and the school, and 6) provide information. Certain parents also mention the importance of being able to convey information about their child, whether in writing or during a private meeting at the end of the evening. The information evenings attended by the parents interviewed fulfilled most participants' targeted objectives. Nevertheless, they did not establish norms of collaboration based on educational goals or identify actions aimed at developing the sharing of responsibility. The study reveals that, for most participants (that is, seven of the eight parents), the information evening met their expectations. In terms of the meeting, parent participants state that their child's teacher inspired trust and confidence.

The study has certain limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized owing to the small size of the sample. Nevertheless, similarities in the participants' perceptions and the overall agreements on certain points of view enable us to view the sixteen interviews as a strength. A saturation of field data allows for the development of hypotheses and, when the research context and sample characteristics are properly described, a possible transferability of findings. Another limitation lies in the participants' level of schooling, which does not appear to be representative of the ensemble of parents in the class. A teacher might thus ask herself if these opinions paint an accurate portrait of all the parents of her students. Finally, although the researcher demonstrates rigour in her research process and analysis of findings along with transparency and attempts to produce objective knowledge, the overall approach is the result of a

one's master's level research project and inevitably includes a few subjective elements.

It is hoped that the findings of this research, mainly parents' expectations regarding the teacher's welcome, information-sharing and personal skills, will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in terms of school-family collaboration. As well, it is hoped they will encourage the development of a sense of competence on the part of future teachers regarding their relationship with parents and offer them the means to encourage parents to participate in their child's learning and school activities. By becoming better informed about the goals of this meeting, its content and the proper attitude to adopt, elementary school teachers can more easily respond to parents' needs and, by means of a first positive encounter, foster their involvement and the educational performance of their child.

Certain information gathered during this research points to other avenues of reflection for future research. Accordingly, a larger sample might be used to compare the expectations of fathers with those of mothers. A more in-depth study could be done comparing and contrasting the expectations of parents with a successful child as opposed to those of parents with a child experiencing difficulty. It could also prove interesting to verify, at the end of the year, to what extent the relationship of trust has developed. Has the parent's first impression changed in the interim and why? Would parents welcome innovative methods during the information evening, particularly with respect to the exchanges? At the intervention level, this new knowledge should be integrated into teachers' initial and ongoing training and disseminated during professional and scientific seminars or workshops.

Acknowledgements

The data from this study are from Isabelle Bergeron's Master's Thesis (2010) done under the supervision of Rollande Deslandes, Ph.D., Department of Educational Sciences, University of Quebec at Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, Canada.

References

- Bagin, R. (2000). How to Enhance Your School's Reputation. Tips for principals from NASSP (The National Association of Secondary School Principals), Reston, VA.
- Bergeron, I. (2010). *La soirée d'information et le développement du lien de confiance entre les parents d'élèves et l'enseignante du primaire*. [The information evening and development of trust links between elementary students' parents and their teachers]. Unpublished master's thesis, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada.
- Browman, B. T. (1999). Kindergarten practices with children from low-income families. In R. C. Pianta and M. J. Cox (eds.), *The transition to kindergarten* (pp. 281-304). MD, Baltimore: P.H. Brookes Publishing.
- Caron, J. (1994). *Quand revient septembre... Guide sur la gestion de classe participative*. [When September comes back. Guide to participatory class management] Montréal : Les Éditions de la Chenelière.
- Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M., (2001). *Schools and families: creating essential connections for learning*. N.Y.: The Guilford press.
- Dauber, S. L., & Epstein, J. L. (1993). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. In N. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a Pluralistic Society* (pp. 53-71). Albany, NY: Suny Press.
- Deslandes, R. (2001). L'environnement scolaire. [The school environment]. In M. Hamel, L. Blanchet and C. Martin (eds.), *6-12-17, We will be much better! The determinants of health and well-being of school age children* (pp. 251-286). Québec : Les Publications du Québec.
- Deslandes, R. (2004a). L'accueil réservé aux familles par le milieu scolaire. [School welcoming to families]. Texte rédigé pour la Semaine québécoise de la Famille 2004. *Propos de familles*, [Text written for the 2004 Quebec Family Week, about Families] vol. 9, pp. 17-19.
- Deslandes, R. (2004b). Regard sur les compétences des enseignants requises dans leurs relations avec les parents d'élèves. [Focus on required teachers' competencies in their relationships with students' parents]. In R. Toussaint and C. Xypas (eds.), *La notion de compétence en éducation et en formation* [The notion of competency in education and training] (pp. 151-173). Paris : L'Harmattan.
- Deslandes, R. (2009). *International perspectives on student outcomes and homework. Family-school-community partnerships*. Contexts of Learning. London and New York: Routledge.
- Deslandes, R., Fournier, H., & Rousseau, N. (2005). Relations of trust between parents and teachers of children in elementary school. In Raquel-Amaya Martinez-Gonzalez, Ma del Henar Pérez-Herrero and Beatriz Rodriguez-Ruiz, (pp. 213-232). *Family-school-community partnerships, merging into social development*, Oviedo, Spain: Grupo SM.
- Deslandes, R., & Jacques, M. (2004). Relations famille-école et l'ajustement du comportement socioscolaire de l'enfant à l'éducation préscolaire. [Family-school relationships and behavioral adjustment of the child to preschool]. *Éducation et Francophonie XXXII*, 1, 172-200.
- Deslandes, R., Jacques, M., Doré-Côté, A., & Bélanger, S. (2004). Les nouvelles familles et l'école [New families and schools]. In M.C. Saint-Jacques, D. Turcotte, S. Drapeau and R. Cloutier (eds.) *Séparation, monoparentalité et recomposition familiale* [Separation, single parenthood and blended families]. (pp. 311-327). Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships : Preparing educators and improving schools*, 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Heyda, P. A. (2002). *The Primary Teacher's Survival Guide*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. ED468739.
- Jonson, K. F. (2002). *The New Elementary Teacher's Handbook. Flourishing in Your First Year*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

- L'Écuyer, R. (1990). *Méthodologie de l'analyse développementale de contenu. Méthode GPS et Concept de soi*. [Developmental analysis methodology of content. GPS method and self-concept]. Sillery, Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- L.R.Q., (mai 2000). Comité patronal de négociation pour les commissions scolaires francophones et la centrale de l'enseignement du Québec, [Management Negotiating Committee for French school boards and central of Quebec school]
- Margolis, H., & Brannigan, G. (1986). Building trust with parents. Eight strategies to help professionals build a trusting relationship with parents. *Academic Therapy* 22 (1), 71-74.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A.M. (1991). *Analyse de données qualitative: recueil de nouvelles données* [Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods]. Bruxelles : De Boeck.
- Ministry of Education (2001). *La formation à l'enseignement. Les orientations. Les compétences professionnelles* [Training for teaching. Directions. Competencies]. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec.
- Smolkin, L. B. (1999). The practice of effective transitions. Players who make a winning team. In R. C. Pianta et M. J. Cox (eds.), *The transition to kindergarten* (pp. 325-349). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Terrisse, B., Larose, F., Lefebvre, M-L., & Bédard, J. (2005). Étude des besoins d'information et de formation à l'exercice des rôles éducatifs des parents québécois ayant de jeunes enfants (naissance-12 ans) et adéquation avec les services offerts par les organismes de soutien à la famille. [Study information needs and training to pursue educational roles of Quebec parents with young children (birth-12 years), and adequacy with services offered by organizations to support the family. *Report to Fund Research in Quebec on Society and Culture (FQRSC)*]. Québec: Programme Actions Concertées.
- Van der Maren, J.-M. (1993). *Méthodes de recherches pour l'éducation*. [Research Methods for Education]. Bruxelles, Belgium: De Boeck.
- Walker, B. M., (1998). Meetings without communication: A study of parents' evenings in secondary schools. *British Educational Research Journal* 24 (2), 163-178.
- Weiss, H. M., & Edwards, M. E. (1992). The family-school collaboration project: Systemic interventions for school improvement. In S. L. Christenson and J. C. Conoley (eds.), *Home-school collaboration: Enhancing children's academic and social competence* (pp. 215-243). Silver Spring, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Appendix 1.

Table 2

Parents' expectations regarding the teacher's personal and professional qualities

Statements	Number of participants for each response			
	3	2	1	0
<i>It is important for the teacher to...</i>	3	2	1	0
-Express clearly her expectations regarding the parents' role (peq)	6	2		
-Demonstrate that the child is her main focus (proq)	8			
-Demonstrate that she knows what she must teach the children (coq)	6	2		
-Be dynamic (proq)	6	2		
-Master the subject content she presents (coq)	5	3		
-Display passion for her profession (proq).	8			
-Take time to listen to the parents (peq)	3	5		
-Display professionalism (peq)	5	3		
-Demonstrate she is informed about child development (peq)	5	2	1	
-Demonstrate that she is gentle with children (proq)	6	2		
-Be organized (proq)	4	4		
-Be authentic (proq)	6	2		
-Question parents about their needs (peq)	4	3	1	
-Demonstrate a positive attitude (proq)	6	2		
-Demonstrate that her pedagogical and didactic choices are helping children progress (peq)	5	2	1	
-Communicate that parents are a key factor in the achievement of educational objectives (peq)	4	4		

Legend: (0) Not really important; (1) More or less important; (2) Important; (3) Very important
 Peq: personal qualities; Proq: professional qualities; Coq: collaborative qualities