

Fostering Family–School–Community Partnership With Parents of Students With Developmental Disabilities: Participatory Action Research With the 3D Sunshine Model

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Abstract

Education studies have repeatedly emphasized the crucial contribution of family–school–community partnership to children’s academic and educational success, as well as to improving organizations and systems. Such partnership becomes even more complex when the child presents needs in several areas of development. In this context, it is essential that researchers work collaboratively with actors in the field, first to identify barriers to family–school–community partnership, and then to support the implementation of levers to overcome those barriers. In this research, we built upon an existing model, the Sunshine Model, and tested our enhanced model *in vivo* in three specialized schools in greater Montreal serving adolescents with developmental disabilities. Operationalization of the adapted model through participatory action research shows great promise for supporting professionals, not only in specialized but also in inclusive school settings, in grasping the multilevel dimensions—types and diversity of activities, partnership principles, interactional contextual factors—that facilitate or impede family–school–community partnership.

Key Words: family, professional, partnership, participatory action research, family and community friendly school

Introduction

Since the 1980s, education studies have repeatedly highlighted the crucial contribution of family–school–community partnership to children’s academic and educational success, as well as to improving organizations and systems (Epstein, 1987; Gofen & Blomqvist, 2014; Turnbull et al., 1984). Four decades on, while parents’ place within education systems has evolved for the better, family–school–community collaboration has not yet taken on the desired scope, in the sense of a power synergy between parents and professionals oriented towards creating innovative solutions to promote education for all children while respecting their diversity (Bezdek et al., 2010; Resch et al., 2010). While numerous studies have noted changes in professionals’ values and attitudes towards families, particularly in terms of greater openness, it remains that concrete proposals for actions that would achieve real transformation taking into account parents’ voices are scarce (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

The family–school–community partnership becomes even more complex when the child presents needs in several areas of development (cognitive, affective, etc.), as is the case for children with developmental disabilities requiring significant and multiple levels of support, which may be accompanied by major issues among parents in terms of stress and distress, job loss, spousal separation, and so on (Corcoran et al., 2015). Recent studies on advocacy among parents of children with developmental disabilities have shown, moreover, that many must fight not only to ensure their children’s fundamental rights to quality education, but also to decide on placement options, to obtain services adapted to their children’s needs, and to become full partners in planning their educational program (Burke & Goldman, 2017; Chatenoud et al., 2019).

Some authors also point out that, for many parents, their motivation to be involved tends to decrease over time as their child moves from primary through secondary education, and that this decrease is closely associated with a perception of not being welcome in school activities and not being able to contribute to their child’s educational programs (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). For adolescents with developmental disabilities, however, parental engagement contributes strongly to their ability to succeed and to become more self-determining in their educational and life projects. A strong family–school–community partnership is thus essential to enhance communication and interaction among family members, school staff, and other actors in the community and the vocational support sector, in order to facilitate adolescents’ transition to living/working environments post-high school and their social participation in society (Blacher et al., 2010).

In light of the above, researchers and education professionals urgently need to undertake innovative actions to instigate practice changes with a view to creating communities adapted to the diverse requirements of not only these children with developmental disabilities, but also their families (Gomez, 2013). It is essential that researchers work collaboratively with actors in the field, first to identify barriers to family–school–community partnership, and then to support the implementation of levers to overcome those barriers (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Researchers must give serious thought to how knowledge mobilization strategies might be deployed to support school and community actors, including parents, and to help them develop learning resources and transform their practices (Randi & Corno, 2007).

Following on this premise, the present article reports on an ongoing participatory action research (PAR) program rooted in a transformative paradigm in which researchers engage with community actors “as part of a broader agenda for progressive social change” (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016, p. 295). This research began as a direct response to a request from parents of students with developmental disabilities in a specialized high school in Montreal, Quebec. Here it should be noted that, although the province of Quebec is moving gradually towards the concept of inclusive schooling, students with complex educational needs in terms of development or behavior are still most often referred to specialized institutions, as inclusive schooling remains politically unavailable. Even so, the members of the school community (parents and staff) who approached the research team had a keen interest in putting into action values which, at their level, could improve family–school–community partnership while respecting the diversity of families and their children. It also seemed essential to us, as researchers, to rely on a model founded on values of inclusivity (Kearney & Kane, 2006) that could be applied to link actions with values (Booth & Ainscow, 2016), even in a segregated school community (Slee, 2011).

We therefore decided to operationalize a theoretical model—the Sunshine Model, created by American researchers (Haines et al., 2017; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2017)—to support the development of family–school–community partnerships for inclusive education. The advantage of this model is that it brings together various bodies of research knowledge from specialized and non-specialized school settings that are often exploited in silos when it comes to producing desired changes in the field of practice (Haines et al., 2017). Our aim in this paper is to present the results of the first cycle of inquiry of the PAR project in which we adapted this comprehensive model for our specific Canadian context.

Family–School–Community Partnership in the Context of Educational Diversity

There is extensive research evidence that family–school–community partnership is enabled through policies that strengthen parents’ rights within the educational system, foster shared values and attitudes that recognize parents’ paramount role in their child’s development, and support multidirectional activities between home, school, and external resources (Haines et al., 2017). This, in turn, will enhance opportunities for parents to express their voice and be present in their child’s education (Epstein, 2011, Haines et al., 2017; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Furthermore, over the past 40 years, theoretical models in both general and special education have been developed and enriched. Such models are commonly used to organize and discuss facilitators or barriers to this partnership. Some describe practices related to parents’ involvement in their child’s school experience (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 1987) or the processes by which they are motivated (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), and some focus on principles related to strengthening family–school–community partnership (Turnbull et al., 1984). Nevertheless, there are persistent gaps between the rhetoric and practices.

A major reason for this discrepancy could be insufficient knowledge uptake, that is, that the theory has not yet been internalized by the key actors in the field. Researchers need to collaborate with professionals and parents to consider theories in relation to their specific societal context and educational services model (Chatenoud et al., 2016). They should also make substantial efforts to consider the diversity of families and professionals in their unique educational and cultural backgrounds (Harry, 2008). In line with multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), which takes into account the diversity of students’ behavioral, cultural, and linguistic profiles, it would seem advisable for educational institutions to reflect on family–school–community partnerships to “find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 110).

Indeed, the anchoring of family–school–community partnerships in the reality of local context and environment is supported in the literature on sociolinguistics (Muscott, 2002; Nunez Moscoso & Ogay, 2016), on intercultural education (Beauregard, 2011; Harry, 2008), and on parents’ motivational involvement at school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), in which are described the power struggles and the communicational and interactional issues that arise in parent–professional relationships. Sociolinguistic studies have made it clear, for instance, that language and interpersonal relations are not an “encapsulated formal system” (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992, p.

1) isolated from the rest of the culture and society. In fact, a conversation or “speech event” follows a complex set of socially recognized rules linked to a specific context within an interaction (Auer & Di Luzio, 1992). An interaction first involves the modality used (e.g., in-person or not, uni- or bidirectional, degree of interactivity, type of vocabulary), then the partners’ recognition of a specific social situation with norms, values, and authority, and, finally, of their roles in co-constructing the contextual meaning of this situation. The partners share verbal and non-verbal cues related to their understanding of the interaction taking place. These insights from sociolinguistics are helpful in understanding contextual issues in the parent–professional relationship that may be unclear or poorly calibrated and likely to impede the desired partnership. For example, in meetings or conversations, professionals often use technical jargon that excludes parents. Parents’ only options then are to acquiesce or to attempt to qualify the professionals’ evaluative comments (Nunez Moscoso & Ogay, 2016), such that their own expertise is not sufficiently acknowledged (de Geeter et al., 2002). Likewise, the spaces in which meetings occur play a fundamental role in the interactions between parents and teachers, either enabling them to interact easily or imposing a distance between them, depending on the parents’ prior experience and each partner’s expectations of what is appropriate in the school setting (Cettou & Ogay, 2013). All these interaction parameters are culturally located and should be considered when it comes to enabling family–school–community partnership.

Researchers have underscored the importance of sociocultural perspectives in family–school–community partnerships by encouraging professionals to reflect on the diversity of the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of parental engagement (Lalvani, 2012). As indicated by Filliettaz and Schubauer-Leoni (2008), people’s habits, culture, knowledge, and familiarity with conversational norms have a direct influence on whether they feel confident or unsettled during discussions with others. Thus, interactional difficulties may arise because the school professionals’ expectations regarding forms of parental involvement are very much rooted in the culture of the country and/or the school, whereas many parents do not share that culture and thus do not meet the professionals’ expectations. Studies have shown, however, that parents engage in their child’s educational path through highly diverse practices depending on their own construction of their parental role and different sociocultural variables (Beauregard, 2011; Odier-Guedj et al., 2021). As such, making room for other people’s culture and practices is a key component in overcoming barriers to partnerships.

This resonates with the work of other authors who have identified contextual aspects of the parent–professional relationship that influence the degree of

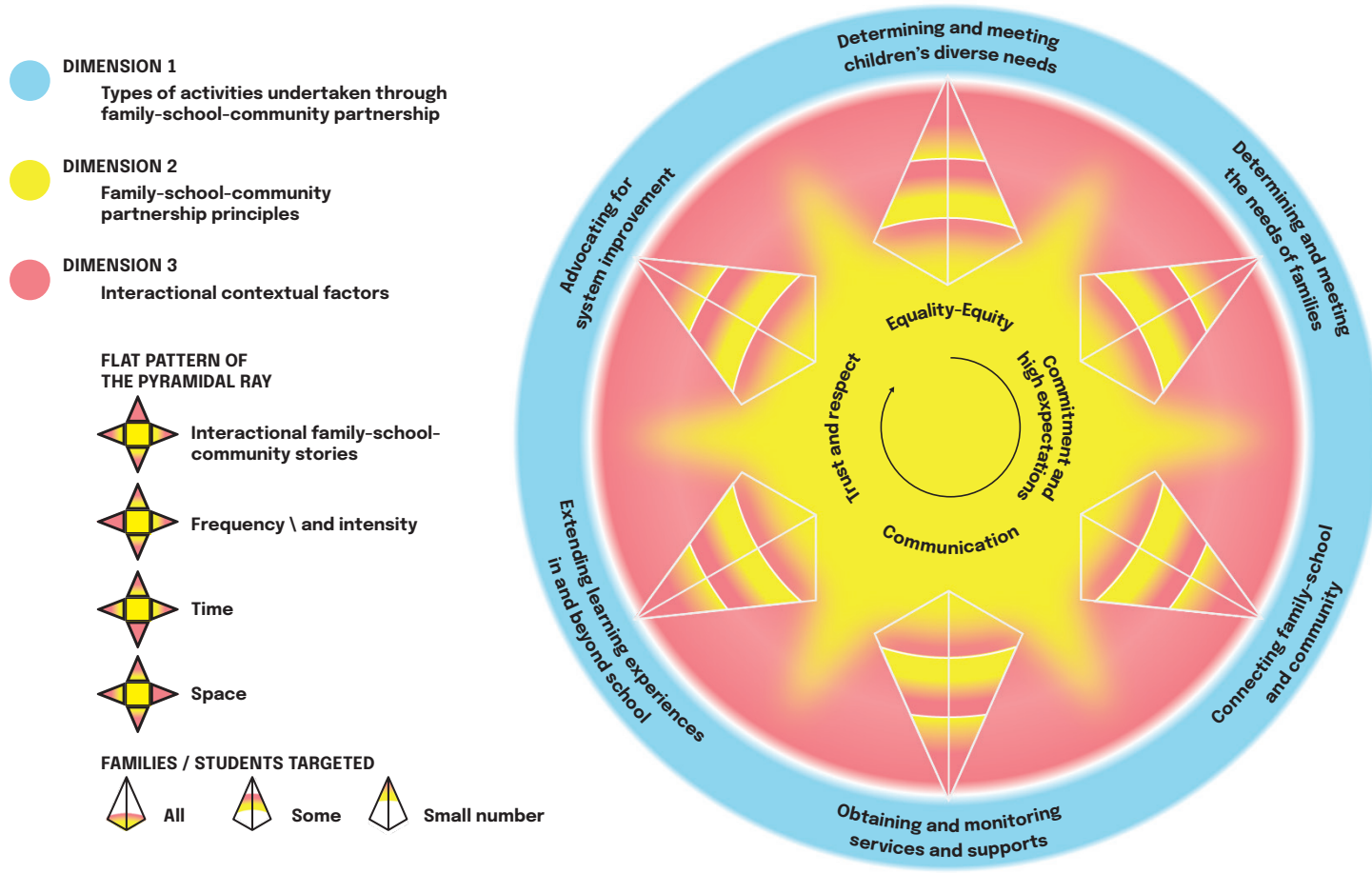
parental involvement at home and at school, including parents' motivational beliefs (perception of their parental role and self-efficacy), perceived life context (time, energy, work–family balance), and family resources (socioeconomic variables; Green et al., 2007). In fact, numerous studies on parents' motivation have highlighted the variability of their expectations and demands, depending on what stage they are at in their family life, their relationship with the school culture, and their needs and those of their child, which are constantly evolving (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Theoretical Framework: The 3D Sunshine Model

In 2017, Haines and colleagues published a new model, the Sunshine Model, which sets out a multitiered and multidimensional approach to family–professional partnership that is designed to support the development of inclusive education. This promising and comprehensive theoretical framework combines two dimensions. The first consists of structural parameters, such as the types of activities and forms of invitations that professionals extend to parents to strengthen their involvement at school (Epstein, 2011), while the second comprises the fundamental principles for fostering partnerships with all parents, especially those of children with disabilities (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). As mentioned above, even though we were operating in specialized schools for students with complex needs, we considered this model to be of interest as a potential cornerstone for the eventual deployment of inclusive education in both the province of Quebec and similar jurisdictions. This process is under way, aimed at redressing the exclusion not only of students, but of their parents as well (Chatenoud et al., 2019).

After some reflection, before operationalizing this very useful conceptual framework in the PAR project with our school partners, we felt it would be important to adapt the model to take into account the diversity of educational contexts where it might be implemented. For this, we added a third dimension: interactional contextual factors. Then, to make it easier for the research participants (e.g., school professionals) to use the model as a knowledge mobilization tool, we adjusted it further, transforming the sunshine rays into pyramids, whose structure and purpose are explained below (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates our adaptation of the model, which we have called the 3D Sunshine Model.

Figure 1. The 3D Sunshine Model



Note. Modified from Haines et al. (2017) and Turnbull and Turnbull (2017).

First Dimension: Types of Activities Undertaken with Parents

The six components of the 3D Sunshine Model's first dimension, located at the extremity of each sun ray in the blue sky (outer circle) surrounding the sun, represent the types of activity that can be accomplished through and by the family–school–community partnership to engage parents' fluid and dynamic participation in ways that respect the diversity of settings, families, and students. This dimension refers to the appeals and methods used by schools to foster partnerships in special or mainstream education (Epstein, 2011; Beauregard, 2011). Each type of activity is focused on the specific needs of individual students and families, as well as on parents' involvement in school and on strengthening the family–school–community connections (Trépanier & Beauregard, 2013).

The first ray, *Determining and meeting children's diverse needs*, emphasizes the importance of meaningful dialogue between parents and professionals, working together in teams to conduct best practices evaluation, intervention, and follow-up in ways that respect each child's unique needs (Westwood, 2021). This ray calls for consideration of students' needs, especially in relation to developmental disabilities, and with respect to universal design for learning and issues of pedagogical differentiation (Rao & Meo, 2016). The second ray focuses on *Determining and meeting the needs of families*, which may differ from those of the children and which are not sufficiently acknowledged and addressed in the school context (Villeneuve et al., 2013). The third (*Connecting family, school, and community*) and fourth (*Obtaining and monitoring services and supports*) rays are aimed at helping parents and other family members navigate the formal services system and identify resources in the community that can enhance their well-being and quality of life (Rivard et al., 2015; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2017). These two rays are vital in contexts where parents frequently encounter barriers in accessing specialized services that are relevant, of good quality, responsive to the needs of each family member, and offered continuously over different stages of the family life cycle (Rivard et al., 2020). The fifth ray, *Extending learning experiences in and beyond school*, encompasses activities that families and professionals select together to enable students to extend their learning outside school. These may involve parents directly—for instance, by building on family literacy habits such as reading books, newspapers, and so on (Allen, 2007)—or they may consist of engaging students in leisure activities outside of school. The aim of this ray is to bring cohesion to the child's learning both in and outside of school (home, community centers, etc.) and to foster family–professional partnership for community-based inclusive education. The last ray, *Advocating for system improvement*, concerns activities carried

out by professionals and parents aimed at individual and/or systemic action to defend children's right to inclusive education, as well as families' right to be active members of the educational team (Chatenoud et al., 2019).

Just as in the original model, but presented here in a 3D pyramidal format, each ray is designed with three levels reflecting a MTSS approach, targeting the needs of a small number of students/families at the top of each ray, more students/families in the middle, and all students/families at the base level. As such, activities can be designed that involve practical actions with all families, such as a clothing fair open to everyone at school, or a small number of families, such as preenrollment meetings or visits. These levels of action tailored to student/family needs are represented as pyramids in the legend on the lower left of Figure 1. These three small pyramids apply to each ray, making the model more dynamic.

Second Dimension: Partnership Principles

The fundamental principles of family–school–community partnership for inclusive education make up the second dimension, represented by the sun's center rendered in yellow in Figure 1 (Haines et al., 2017; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2017). Emanating from the heart of the sun, these principles are diffused among all the rays. Hence, for each type of activity in any ray, the actors are led to reflect, collectively and individually, on how to convey the partnership principles. To help our research participants memorize these principles when using the theoretical model, our research team transformed each ray of the original model into a 3D pyramid with a square base and four triangular sides (as represented in the flat pattern of the legend). The four edges of the pyramid base correspond to the four principles at the sun's center, which are the bedrock of any invitation or action, infused in every sun ray. *Trust and respect*, on one edge, are key attitudinal principles underpinning the family–professional partnership. The second edge, *Equality and equity*, underscores the reciprocity and mutually supportive interaction needed to overcome barriers associated with professionals' "expert posture" towards parents—an exclusionary phenomenon frequently documented in research (Bezdek et al., 2010)—as well as those caused by institutional scripts that impede family–professional partnerships in numerous schools (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The third edge, *Commitment and high expectations*, refers to professionals' and parents' joint efforts towards a shared goal for the benefit of both child and family (Turnbull et al., 1984). *Communication* is the fourth edge, which is essential to effective family–school–community partnership.

Third Dimension: Interactional Contextual Factors

The last dimension, depicted in red in the model, is *Interactional contextual factors*. These are four essential components of the context that play an essential role in fostering the development of an inclusive educational community based on close collaboration between family, school, and community. Each factor corresponds to a face of the pyramid, as represented in the flat pattern of the pyramidal ray.

The first contextual factor explores interactional family–school–community stories. The interactions between parents and professionals, as well as with the community outside of school, are largely influenced by the implicit beliefs on each side about what place parents should occupy within educational systems, beliefs which are often incongruent between the parties (Bezdek et al., 2010). Bringing families and teachers closer together inevitably requires that professionals understand what values they do or do not have in common with parents, pay attention to parents’ experiences within and outside of the school, and listen to their accounts of positive or negative history with previous school partners (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). “This means knowing them, listening to their stories, and understanding what will be most helpful to them in raising their children and supporting their children’s school learning” (Edwards, 2011, p. 114). This also means that professionals need to be sensitive to the roles in their children’s education that parents have constructed through their experiences with the school system. From one meeting to the next, to maintain the continuity of the relationship, the partners need to be able to document what they know about each other, what they have previously shared, the institutional constraints, and so forth.

The second factor, frequency and intensity, refers to the timing and duration of activities and meetings. These need to be scheduled at a pace that accommodates those families who wish to participate. The third and fourth factors, time and space, represent the temporal dimensions and spatial context of family–school–community interactions: when and where to meet? As mentioned earlier, sociolinguistics theory would recommend that the partners be invited to reflect on the importance of the place and time for meetings and the impact these can have on the partnership.

To sum up, these three-dimensional pyramids, presented in a flat pattern in the Figure 1 legend, are mnemonic devices for the partners. Each of the six pyramids is a sun ray referring to a type of activity. The four edges of each pyramid base correspond to the four partnership principles. The pyramid sides correspond to the four contextual factors, with each face showing the gradations representing the three levels of the multitiered approach, to recall the

importance of adjusting the proposals to the diverse needs of families. In adding a third dimension to the original Sunshine Model, our aim was to help professionals become more sensitive to each parent as a unique individual, rather than asking parents to conform to school practices (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

Research Approach

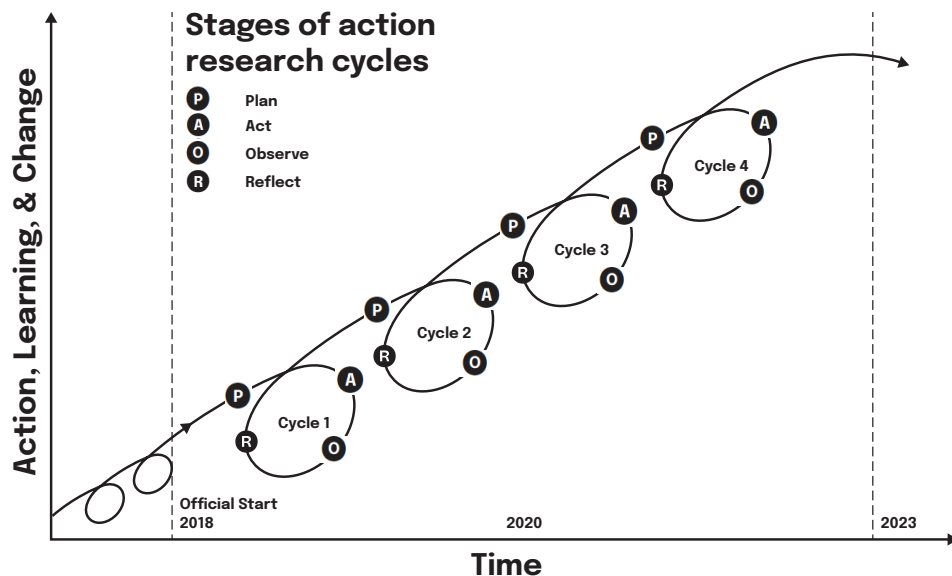
The three schools for students with developmental disabilities where the study took place are in the city center of Montreal. However, the 184 students come from different neighborhoods, even distant ones, as the criterion for admission is the diagnostic profile (moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders) and not local residence. Two schools serve students aged 12 to 15 years, while the third is specialized for students aged 16 to 21 years; students often transition from one school to another. To meet the particular educational needs of these students, the staff is composed of personnel from various disciplines (hereinafter referred to as professionals), mainly teachers, special education technicians, and nonteaching professional support staff, as well as occupational therapists and psychologists. Given that the schools have a large pool of children who are not neighbors of the schools, the families come from very diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, languages, and cultures. In fact, at the start of the first PAR project round presented in this article, the professionals spoke about the challenge of working with families who are very different from one another. Language was not necessarily seen as presenting difficulties, however, as the families in these schools had long spoken French as a second language and interpreters were available in the schools for the various meetings.

This PAR project is rooted in a transformative research paradigm presented by Anderson and McLachlan (2016) in the field of agroecology. Their model contrasts with prescriptive or linear models, as well as with the simple knowledge transfer paradigm that is often employed in research aimed at implementing best practices in the field but that is generally ineffective with respect to families' and professionals' actual knowledge mobilization (O'Donnell, 2008). As highlighted by Anderson and McLachlan:

“...a transformative research paradigm critically rejects the hierarchies of knowledge as reflected in the knowledge transfer paradigm, focusing instead on processes of knowledge mobilization that are based on, ‘reciprocal relationships between researchers and knowledge users for the (co-) creation and use of research knowledge’” (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2011, cited in Anderson & McLachlan, 2016, p. 297).

Our PAR project, designed with the school community as co-enquirers, involves a spiral of four cycles of inquiry, each based on the four phases of action research cycles: plan, act, observe, reflect (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016, p. 300), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. 3D Sunshine PAR Project Cycles



Note. Adapted from Anderson and McLachlan (2016).

The first cycle, *Operationalizing the 3D Sunshine Model*, is focus of this article. Our aim in this cycle was to draw a portrait of the current family–school–community partnership practices and to clearly identify the issues raised by the partners in order to use their work and personal experiences as a foundation to plan subsequent actions. Our specific research objective for this first cycle of inquiry was to explore with parents and professionals: (1) the types of activities undertaken through family–school–community partnership (pyramidal sun rays); (2) the partnership principles applied in the schools (pyramid base); and (3) the contextual factors influencing the family–school–community partnership (pyramid sides).

In the second cycle, which emerged from this one (and which will be reported more fully elsewhere), several committees comprised of parents and professionals were created to develop activities to promote family–school–community partnership in connection with the six types of activities. In response to issues raised during team discussions, a training session was held on the partnership principles embedded into the 3D Sunshine Model. The third cycle, building

on the first two, is intended to focus on knowledge mobilization. Participants plan to share their experience through multiple activities with other schools similarly involved in developing family–school–community partnerships. To date, these dissemination activities have not yet been finalized, with progress having been impeded by, among other things, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions of the past year. Finally, in a context where the Education Ministry has called upon schools to adapt their communication and support to respond to the needs and interests of their student population (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement Supérieur, 2017), the fourth cycle is conceived as more political, aimed at advocating for family–school–community partnership through public forums and media channels. The 3D Sunshine Model presents a clear advantage at this stage, as it has the potential to promote the implementation of more family and community friendly school environments in educational settings where parents' right to be included as partners in the school is still rarely institutionalized. In contrast to the United States, where federal law puts family–professional partnerships at the heart of the academic success of students with developmental disabilities, this legal incentive is less explicit in Quebec (Chatenoud et al., 2019). As stated above, this article presents the first action cycle, conducted in four phases, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Action Cycle 1: Operationalizing the 3D Sunshine Model

Stage 1: Plan

In the summer of 2018, the parent chairperson of the governing board for the three schools contacted the principal investigator to discuss parents' growing concerns about their place and role in these schools. We subsequently met with the governing board, composed of 14 members: four principals (senior principal and three school principals), four parents' representatives, two teachers, two nonteaching professional support staff, one pedagogical advisor, and one member of the before- and afterschool care team. The board members recognized the importance of identifying needs with respect to collaborative partnerships. It was agreed that our team would consult the professionals and parents to gather their views on the current situation and discuss the development of a PAR project to promote change in the school using the 3D Sunshine Model as a possible framework. A subcommittee of the governing board was created, with two parents and six professionals, called the Family Partnership Committee (*Comité Partenariat Famille*) to coordinate communications and facilitate planning (financial and administrative) for this project.

Stage 2: Act

Consultations were carried out with school professionals and parents using different approaches, recognizing the different constraints, availabilities, and logistics particular to the two groups. First, six focus groups with school professionals were conducted in October 2018. Members of the research team (two professors, four university students) each led one group, providing non-directive support to ensure full participation and smooth discussion. All school staff ($n = 150$) were divided into six focus groups by professional affiliation: (1) classroom teachers; (2) subject teachers (physical education, arts, music); (3) special education teachers; (4) support staff, including teachers' aides and attendants of students with disabilities; (5) therapists (psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses); and (6) social workers and resource personnel. In each group, participants together produced brief written definitions of parent-teacher collaboration (i.e., essential ingredients); reasons for collaboration; what they were doing for the children; their ways of getting to know families; what remained problematic; and aspirations regarding collaboration. The four school administrators were consulted using the same format in November 2018. We used a different approach for parents, as bringing them together for a focus group did not seem feasible due to families' widespread places of residence, sometimes very far from the school. In February 2019, an invitation was sent to all parents via students' take-home folders and an email from the school administration (in French, the language shared by all parents) to participate in this consultation project. Participating families received a questionnaire covering the same themes and questions discussed with professionals in the focus groups. Sociodemographic information on the families and the Family Partnership Scale complemented this information (Summers et al., 2005). Parents could either complete and return their questionnaires by mail or be interviewed by the principal investigator. Of 184 potential families, 25 participated: 21 questionnaires were completed, and four interviews were conducted, for a response rate of 13.6%. Despite this small sample, and in view of the sociodemographic questionnaire, these 25 families appeared fairly representative of a certain diversity of parents within the school. Five were immigrant families, but all had been in Quebec for a long time, between 13 and 51 years. Of the 25 families, 12% had a low annual income, while the others ranged from average to high. Most of the parents had a college or university level of education; three had only an elementary level.

The focus group transcripts prepared by a research assistant and, along with the responses to the parent questionnaire, were analyzed using NVivo 12 software. Counter-coding produced a 98% agreement rate, which is considered very satisfactory. The research team used a closed thematic coding grid (Paillé

& Mucchielli, 2016) that included the three dimensions of the 3D Sunshine Model: (1) activities currently offered for parents to collaborate within and outside the classroom (sun rays); (2) the school staff's knowledge about and attitudes towards partnership principles (pyramid bases); and (3) variations in the contextual factors influencing collaboration (four pyramid sides). Based on the selected sense units (SUs), a second coding was performed with two free nodes: facilitators and impediments. Once compiled, the SUs were quantified by category and analyzed by the team for dissemination to all school staff and parents. This quantification provided a clear picture of the collaborative practices that, in the eyes of the participants—both parents and professionals, appeared recurrently or infrequently. In this way, our work with the participants started from their own reality and not from that projected by the researcher (Anderson & McLachlan 2016).

Stage 3. Observe

In presenting the results to the participants, the research team grouped the information according to the three dimensions of the 3D Sunshine Model and introduced a common theoretical framework to support reflection on future action. For the professionals, we used the “World Café” format. In this format, as in a café, participants are seated at a table on which is placed a poster to support their discussion and on which each participant can write or draw (Brown, 2005). After a given time, groups of participants move to another table to discuss and mark up another poster. At the end, the resulting posters are discussed collectively. This approach aims to encourage everyone's participation in a safe environment and to bring in different perspectives. In our PAR project, the posters on the tables corresponded to the results grouped by types of activities (the sun rays/pyramids). In a first meeting, the staff was divided into teams of 10 to 12 to complete posters related to the focus group results. The teams each spent 15 minutes with one poster and then moved on to the next. Each team was asked to verify the information provided and improve the posters by adding any activities that may have been omitted. This collaborative work produced a consolidated list of all activities and practices currently extended to parents, according to the multitiered approach (i.e., ranging from just a few students and parents to all) in each sun ray, as well as written wishes regarding new activities that could be undertaken with parents. Finally, at a second meeting with all the professionals, the principal researcher presented the completed posters from the World Café in conjunction with the results from the parents' questionnaires. The posters highlighted the activities currently in place (dimension 1), barriers to the partnership principles (dimension 2), and interactional contextual factors (dimension 3). For each dimension, particular

attention was paid to conveying clearly the parents' experiences in the school, which sometimes contrasted sharply with those of the professionals. Our aim was to encourage reflection among the professionals that would take into account parents' experiences.

For parents, activities for this third stage were organized in various formats to accommodate their living situations. An evening meeting, to which all were invited and about 20 attended, was filmed and made accessible on the school's website. An article in the school newspaper also presented the results.

Stage 4. Reflect

Parents and professionals were invited to join with the research team to reflect on these results and begin planning the second cycle of the PAR project, which was to focus on optimizing the practices already offered in the school to make them more inclusive and to overcome barriers linked to dimensions 2 (partnership principles) and 3 (interactional contextual factors). Four more parents and six professionals were added to the Family Partnership Committee created in Stage 1. Subcommittees associated with each sun ray were created to implement new activities. As mentioned earlier, results of the second cycle will be presented elsewhere.

Across the four stages, whether working with parents or with professionals, we used several research strategies aimed at fostering knowledge mobilization by actors, as suggested by Anderson and McLachlan (2016), the main ones being "layering to communicate knowledge at varying levels of detail" and "building bridges to invite communication amongst diverse knowledge communities" (p. 295). For the first strategy, by working dynamically with the 3D Sunshine Model, we were able to explore collaboration modalities in increasingly precise ways and to organize shared reflections with participants. Our approaches included, for example, presenting the results with a 3D view of the model, sharing points of view in World Café sessions, using a variety of presentation and discussion formats, and providing numerous concrete and relevant examples emerging from the consultation. The dynamic use of the model was also helpful in activating the second knowledge mobilization strategy (building bridges) because parents, professionals, and researchers were able to agree on what we were seeking to improve, even though we were starting from different viewpoints and epistemologies (O'Donnell, 2008).

Results

The results presented here are those obtained in first cycle of the PAR project with school staff and parents. Table 1 shows the number of sense units

(SUs) for each dimension of the 3D Sunshine Model identified from the consultations with professionals and parents.

Table 1. Number of Sense Units (SUs)* in Relation to the Three Dimensions of the 3D Sunshine Model Obtained in the First PAR Cycle With School Staff and Parents

	Professionals		Parents	
	Facilitators	Impediments	Facilitators	Impediments
Dimension 1: Types of activities undertaken through family–school–community partnership				
Determining and meeting children’s diverse needs	143	44	15	5
Obtaining and monitoring services and supports	62	52	1	10
Connecting family-school and community	49	13	1	5
Determining and meeting the needs of families	26	16	1	6
Extending learning experiences in and beyond school	14	7	1	2
Advocating for system improvement	0	0	0	0
Dimension 2: Family–school–community partnership principles				
Communication	127	61	8	9
Trust and respect	71	68	4	1
Commitment and high expectations	40	41	5	1
Equality–equity	28	12	3	11
Dimension 3: Interactional contextual factors				
Time	52	43	0	1
Interactional family–school–community stories	45	27	0	2
Space	27	11	0	1
Frequency and intensity	7	5	0	4

*A sense unit (SU) is a lexical unit (word, sentence) whose meaning is closely related to the dimensions of the 3D Sunshine Model.

Dimension 1: Types of Activities Undertaken Through Family–School–Community Partnership

First, most of what professionals and parents said about collaboration concerned the sun ray on *determining and meeting children's diverse needs*, which included assessing the child's strengths and difficulties, setting objectives in the Individual Education Plan (IEP, as they are named in Canada), and following up on these over the year. Regarding this aspect of collaboration, both groups generally spoke positively of their activities and identified few impediments. Some professionals reported that it was difficult for school staff to work in an interdisciplinary manner to provide parents with a comprehensive picture of their child:

We don't have any collaboration among ourselves. As attendants to students with disabilities, sometimes we don't have half the information about the students we're dealing with. We have basic information and hygiene. I spend all my time looking for this information, so imagine the parent. (Focus Group 6)

Parents' experience of partnership appeared closely linked to their child's needs; apart from meetings to discuss their child's IEP, few other activities were mentioned in line with this ray.

In second place came statements associated with the ray on *obtaining and monitoring services and supports*. Primarily, school staff noted that opportunities for tripartite collaboration among themselves, parents, and external specialists—whether in health, rehabilitation, or social work—were limited, in a context of scarcity and high turnover of specialists within the various sectors. In this component, school professionals were more focused on informing parents about specialized services available and less on providing multidisciplinary collaboration opportunities within the school. Parents' reported experience correlated with this observation, as they described a crucial lack of collaboration between school staff and external specialists, and some complained that they had to pay for private resources for stimulating their child's development, especially in relation to language and interaction. Meetings between school staff members and external specialist partners were held only for a small number of parents and students with greater needs.

Third, activities aimed at *connecting family, school, and community* were mentioned more as aspirations than as a reality within the school. The school staff seemed open to developing this collaborative aspect, which appeared not to be very prevalent in the school:

I'd like to meet informally with parents, because seriously, I think it would make them feel at home, it would give them information, and

they could meet other parents going through the same difficulties as they are, the same challenges, and that could do them good [to get together] over a cup of coffee. (Focus Group 3)

A majority of parents, for their part, expressed a willingness to be more involved at school, such as helping to organize social get-togethers or volunteering in class.

Finally, the other types of activities—*determining and meeting the needs of families* and *extending learning experiences in and beyond school*—were scarcely mentioned during the focus groups, and it was only in the World Café activity that staff brought up actions related to these. Parents, likewise, reported few activities apart from meetings to discuss their child’s IEP. Some parents deplored receiving no support in their efforts to help their child with literacy or numeracy at home. Another issue related to these two rays was the shortage of services (social assistants, social workers, etc.) to support parents’ needs. Parents described poor school support for their needs within the family and needs related indirectly to the child, such as for parents’ psychological adjustment, financial needs, and so forth. Many professionals acknowledged the parents’ distress and regretted not being able to do more.

Dimension 2: Family–School–Community Partnership Principles

With regard to this dimension, which forms the core of the model (pyramid base), many statements were collected on the principles of *communication* and *trust and respect*. School staff stressed the importance of transparent communication with parents about their children to foster harmonious collaboration, but also noted important impediments, such as the fact that school staff and parents do not always use the same communication channels:

Even just picking up documents in the folder...there are lots of documents that stay in the back folder. Communicating via the binder, not all parents are comfortable doing that. There are some that don’t communicate. (Focus Group 1)

Some professionals spoke about the need to sort out with families at the beginning of the year what would be the most effective means of communication. For their part, parents reported that they lacked sufficient quantity and quality of information about their child and the functioning of the school: “The agenda [notebook] does not allow for more information and does not include enough space” (Questionnaire, Parent 8). Specifically, some parents would have liked to know more about their child’s activities, learning, classroom behavior, or academic and social objectives: “We don’t know what the learning objectives are (they’re supposed to be individualized)” (Questionnaire, Parent

24). One parent noted: “There’s a lot of blah blah for nothing” (Questionnaire, Parent 13). However, some teachers mentioned the use of an online interface that gives parents a better look at what happens in the classroom. Others, but not many, said they invited parents into the classroom to observe their child’s development. One participant noted: “In fact, parents get very little concrete information about what their child is doing at school, in class” (Focus Group 2). Regarding trust and respect, professionals demonstrated a deep awareness of the often precarious and difficult life situations experienced by families facing complex problems, particularly in relation to the behavioral manifestations of disorders during transition to adulthood. For their part, the majority of parents reported on the staff’s open attitude towards their family and were mostly satisfied with their relationship. One mother, for instance, considered them part of the family: “For me, school is an extension of my family” (Questionnaire, Parent 3). They expressed respect for the school staff’s work and had basic confidence in their actions: “I trust them 200%” (Questionnaire, Parent 5). However, the professionals admitted that maintaining trust and respect between parents and professionals could be difficult, especially when the parties did not agree on the child’s objectives or opportunities at school. In these circumstances, the professionals appeared to have little understanding of the parents’ point of view regarding their child’s education. They took on the posture of primary experts on the child and focused poorly on means of overcoming the impasse, as shown in this quote:

I understand your point of view, but at school, we’re working on this, this, this, so that we can do that. So, sometimes there’s a lack of openness or objectivity on both sides, a lack of frankness. Parents don’t trust us, they demand that we take notes, don’t believe what we say. (Focus Group 5)

For the other two partnership principles, there were fewer statements voiced by professionals (80 for *commitment and high expectations* and 40 for *equality–equity*), possibly indicating little attachment to these. The statements referred mainly to the importance of setting ambitious goals for the child, talking positively about the child, and meeting with parents. In contrast, parents often mentioned impediments associated with those two principles and were relatively critical in this regard. Some parents saw little change in the objectives for their child from one year to the next, and some reported that promises to review the IEP together were not always kept, such that they might receive a unilaterally finalized IEP by mail in July. Parents said they did not always feel that all school staff were committed to the school’s mission. Several indicated that it was not individual commitment that was lacking, but rather the overall commitment of the whole school, in terms of activities offered to the children:

Her teacher is a pearl. I would say it's the structure of the school that seems limited. My daughter can do many physical activities, but the school isn't set up to meet these needs. I think she's bored. (Questionnaire, Parent 7)

The *equality–equity* statements also showed that information was conveyed more often by professionals to parents; reciprocity was rare. Parents had little opportunity to understand what went on at school because they were rarely offered the opportunity to be present in class:

I don't open my classroom to parents very much...because it makes me a bit uneasy to include parents that way in school, at large, when everyone is there in class. (Focus Group 1)

For their part, parents reported a desire for a more symmetrical relationship. Some said they felt captive to decisions made by the school and had little impression of any co-construction between parents and professionals for the good of their child. Several parents described a lack of listening on the part of professionals. One parent suggested that professionals should “take more account of the parents' competence when intervening” (Questionnaire, Parent 9). Many parents expressed a willingness to work with school personnel to improve the delivery of sports and music therapy services; some children benefited from such services through extracurricular activities, as they were not available at school.

Dimension 3: Interactional Contextual Factors

The statements on the third dimension concerned contextual factors that impede or foster collaboration with families, for all types of activities. These statements pointed mainly to the time factor as a major facilitator of, or barrier to, their interactions. Teachers lack time in their daily lives to implement best practices for collaboration with parents: “Simple as it sounds, it takes time. The teacher's schedule also needs to be flexible to accommodate that of the parents” (Focus group 1). Parents also complained about the lack of flexibility: “Activities are usually during the day, during working hours. It's hard to get away. I don't get much about the academic process or my child's optimal development. Didn't get the final IEP” (Questionnaire, Parent 2). Many parents found the number of opportunities to meet at school insufficient. Some professionals also emphasized the importance of parents' interactional stories of experiences with school and other professionals:

Sometimes it involves opening up about past experiences of collaboration that went badly. So, sometimes it's about untying the knots in the chakras, the wounds....Sometimes, it means naming past unpleasant experiences honestly, so we don't go there again. (Focus Group 6)

Many parents of young adult students had experienced repeated frustrations with the school, health, and rehabilitation systems. The professionals also said that learning to understand each other and sharing their representations of both the school and the student through the lenses of their different cultural backgrounds takes time. This could be done by using a variety of meeting spaces (either the community center or other spaces outside the school, or the families' living environments), by multiplying opportunities for parents to come to the school, and by giving thought to varying the length and frequency of meetings. In the same vein, some parents asked if it would be possible to meet other parents more often within the school to fulfill their need to feel part of a community. This call to strengthen parents' sense of membership in the school community by extending more invitations also appeared to be impeded by several factors, the prime one being that the schools are sometimes far from the families' homes.

Discussion

This first cycle of the PAR project enabled us to produce, with all the school actors, an initial portrait of the current situation regarding family–school–community partnership practices in those schools and to lay the groundwork for improving these practices in future change-oriented action cycles. This was accomplished by operationalizing the 3D Sunshine Model, which synthesizes the advances in knowledge accumulated over the past four decades. Also, coming into a context where the actors in the field were expressing a clear need to transform practices, it seemed essential to adopt a research modality that would make it possible to start from this request and make the boundaries between academic and nonacademic knowledge more permeable (Grimshaw et al. 2004). Using a participatory methodology, we were able to envision stages of dynamic reflection and questioning between researchers and participants (Plan–Act–Observe–Reflect) and to deploy strategies to help actors in the field mobilize knowledge: layering and building bridges (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016). This carefully engineered process allowed us to clarify participants' needs and current practices before engaging in any transformation. The approach used enabled the actors in the field (parents and professionals) to consolidate their understanding of the important dimensions of family–school–community collaboration conceptualized in the model and to include experiential knowledge in the model's dimensions. This reciprocal enrichment was made possible by these types of interactions. Working with the 3D Sunshine Model also prepared the participants for subsequent action cycles oriented towards change, in particular, by making visible the family–school–community partnership

activities most frequently conducted and those that were more deficient (dimension 1), according to more or less shared principles of collaboration with parents (dimension 2), and in a specific context of interaction (dimension 3). Overall, this research activity helped the professionals mobilize new knowledge and develop a common language that fits with their school culture and practices (Randi & Corno, 2007).

With regard to *family–school–community partnership activities*, the study revealed that little was being done in the participating schools to engage parents as part of the school community beyond the basics provided to meet their child’s needs. Parents seemed to have few opportunities to feel part of a school community where they could contribute and interact outside of their child’s education and learning, such as meeting with other parents, creating bridges between what is done in school and outside, and so on (Allen, 2007; Trépanier & Beauregard, 2013). Efforts are therefore needed to make the school more community-based and welcoming (Allen, 2007; Siegel et al., 2019). The results regarding the second dimension, *partnership principles*, which form the core of the ray (pyramid base), are similar to those obtained in other research—in particular, the fact that the invitations extended to parents are largely unidirectional and that parents’ voices are rarely taken into account (Chatenoud et al., 2019). When conflict emerges, some professionals adopt the “Goldilocks stance” (parent should be involved “just right”) that Bezdek and colleagues (2010) described when studying professional attitudes in American schools. Subsequent cycles of our PAR project will include proactive training sessions to support school staff with consciousness-raising activities, targeting gaps particularly relating to the foundational principles, and emphasizing the need to recalibrate the balance of power in the schools where parents’ voice is seldom heard and rarely taken into account (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

With respect to the third dimension, *interactional contextual factors*, the knowledge gained in this first cycle suggests a need not only to rethink the activities offered, the means deployed, and the application of partnership principles, but also to create a shared interactional story that is helpful for explicitly communicating the expectations of parents and professionals (including speech-language pathologists, teachers, special educators, etc.; Friend & Cook, 2010). As Edwards (2011) pointed out in the *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement*, this would involve sensitizing school staff and making it very clear to parents that the family–school–community partnership includes not only home-based activities (on the *educational needs of the child* sun ray), but also other school-based activities where parents can engage according to their diverse profiles both within or outside the school framework.

The next (second) cycle will encourage reflection on how to vary time, frequency, and location factors when invitations are extended to parents in each ray. For example, parents could be invited to visit the school premises more often and for longer periods of time through activities such as special lunches or shared celebrations. Support could be extended that would encourage those living further away to come to the school—for example, providing transportation, offering supervised activities for children while their parents are occupied so they would not need to arrange for babysitting, and so forth.

Implications for Family–School–Community Practices and Inclusive Community

Many parents of children with disabilities are currently advocating for inclusion and becoming promoters of the transformations inherent in this global movement (Reindl et al., 2016). The 3D Sunshine Model opens the door for reflection on opportunities to bolster parents' positive engagement significantly within schools in ways that are consistent with the reality and experience of actors in the field and with families' specific features. Also, expanding the original model to include the four contextual factors as we have done with our 3D model is essential in light of studies that have described communication difficulties in family–school–community partnership associated with variability in parents' ways of interacting. These are influenced by environmental factors, parents' cultures of affiliation, existing power issues, and especially the sharing or nonsharing of knowledge regarding norms for interacting (Bezdek et al., 2010; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). We believe that working with the 3D Sunshine Model and, more broadly, on family–school–community partnership in specialized schools that maintain a form of segregation of these students that runs counter to inclusion, can be helpful to parents in their struggle against exclusion and their strivings for greater equity within educational environments.

Implications for Research

In the field of health, several studies have shown that knowledge acquisition and the use of targeted interventions deemed optimal by researchers were rarely predictors of population health improvement (Grimshaw et al., 2004). Similarly, in the field of education, while many authors have put forward the essential elements of an inclusive school (Booth & Ainscow, 2016), particularly with respect to family–school–community partnership, the creation of educational environments that welcome the diversity of students and their families is far from being a reality at the global level (Peters, 2007). A shift in research

is needed so that educators in the field can implement evidence-based practices that are firmly entrenched in their daily routines and work culture (O'Donnell, 2008). In this process, the researcher's role is to introduce new knowledge and support its optimal use in relation to the specific questions being considered in the particular setting (Gulamhussein, 2013).

As part of this study, we invested considerable effort in making the theoretical knowledge contained in the Sunshine 3D model more maneuverable by the actors in the field. Three factors seemed important to us to facilitate this transfer. First, we increased the means of uptake: large group presentation to all participants, World Café work, visualization of the model in different formats (2D, 3D), and discussions, among others. Then, the stages conducive to collaboration between the researchers and the participants were spread out over a relatively long period and using an iterative format, which we considered essential for a valid operationalization of the theoretical model. This dynamic gave participants time to consolidate their understanding of the model and to question themselves. Finally, bridges were built between the actors involved (parents–professionals) because the proposed activities were always guided by what made sense to them, that is, what seemed relevant or less relevant and usable in their daily lives, not based on ideas coming from the researchers themselves.

Limitations of the Study

This PAR project was carried out using a qualitative approach with actors from three specialized schools in an educational system that does not automatically provide for students with complex needs to be mainstreamed. This could pose a challenge for generalizing the experience to other settings based on inclusive models. Also, the participants were professionals and parents from small schools with specific situations of children with multiple needs that were more complex than those usually encountered in nonspecialized classes or schools. Still, the experience undertaken with these three specialized schools can also offer an advantage, as the challenges presented by this population should provide a solid foundation for using the model in less complex contexts, where the needs of children and parents could presumably be different and less intensive. In the future, operationalization of the 3D Sunshine Model in other research around the world will add to the body of theoretical knowledge on family–school–community partnership and on specific activities related to it, which will allow for comparisons of practices within schools in a country, as well as between countries.

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