

INTRODUCTION ARTICLE

Family-school partnerships: a challenge for Teacher Education

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Despite evidence of the positive effects of family involvement, its potential is still largely ignored in schools. Teachers do not systematically encourage family involvement, and parents do not always participate when they are encouraged to do so. [...] Several major barriers to family involvement exist in public schools. [...] school environments may discourage family involvement, "... due to lack of adequate time and training of teachers and administrators and a predominant institutional culture in the schools that places little value on the views and participation of parents" (National Task Force on School Readiness, 1991, p. 24). (Shartrand et al. 1997, 12,13).

Research has shown that collaboration between educational institutions, teachers and families can influence pupils' and students' academic achievements, social development and sense of wellbeing in all levels of education (inter alia Castro et al. 2015; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Epstein 2001/2011; Jeynes 2007; Boonk, Geijselaers, Ritzen and Brand-Gruwel, 2018). Therefore, more than two decades ago, Shartrand and colleagues (1997) called for more attention towards teachers' professional development concerning school collaboration with families. This call has been repeated many times over the years (Epstein and Sanders 2006, Epstein 2013, Evans 2013, Saltmarsh, Barr and Chapman 2014, Willemse et al. 2016). In particular, the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers has been highlighted as being problematic. Epstein and Sanders (2006) concluded a decade after Shartrand and colleagues that despite some progress having been made within initial teacher education (ITE) programmes that it was still the case that few pre-service teachers had access to full courses on Family-school partnerships (FSP). They also noticed that there was a lot of resistance to change within ITE programmes. More recent research has concluded that there remains a lack of attention to FSP in ITE (Epstein 2013; Willemse et al. 2016). As Epstein (2013, 117) emphasises: 'More professors of education should feel comfortable and competent conducting a comprehensive course using an updated text that includes research readings, topics to discuss in class, field experiences, and short and long-term projects'. De Bruïne and

colleagues (2014) also describe the struggle of teacher educators to improve the curriculum in times of already overloaded programmes and Evans (2013, see also Willemse et al 2017) in particular notice a lack of attention to FSP in ITE programmes for secondary education.

Given these alarming signals two remarks are of importance. First, many of these studies were conducted in North America (e.g. Epstein 2005) or Australasia (e.g. Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman 2014). Hardly any research has been conducted about the state of the art of pre-service teachers' preparation for FSP in ITE in European countries. However, the rather similar findings of a Dutch-Belgium (Flanders) study (Willemse et al. 2016) compared to Epstein and Sanders' study might imply that the struggle of addressing this topic in ITE programmes in Europe applies too. In overloaded ITE programmes hardly any attention is paid to FSP, except for an occasional course on how to communicate with difficult parents, and accordingly pre-service teachers emphasised that they felt unprepared (De Bruïne et al. 2014; Willemse et al. 2017). Nevertheless, more research about European teacher education programmes seems necessary, especially when it comes to preparing the next generation of teachers to establish FSP.

Second, the benefits of effective FSP have been frequently cited (see above). At the same time responding to global and societal developments such as the increase of technology and social media, globalisation and growing diversity, the rise of global citizenship, migration, or the changing issues concerning equality also involves education (inter alia Veugelers, 2011; Hanssen, 2011; Petko, Prasse and Cantieni, 2018) and the ways in which parents and teachers collaborate (Driessen, Smit and Slegers 2005; Meter and Bauman, 2018). Teachers' professional roles in engaging with families in these concerns is of significant importance (Willemse et al. 2017; Pushor 2014). Hence, these challenges raise the question whether

existing approaches are sufficient or whether more developed approaches to prepare pre-service teachers for FSP are needed.

This special issue consists of two parts: Part I looks at research on the state of the art of preparing pre-service teachers for FSP in ITE programmes in England, Switzerland, the Netherlands/Belgium, Spain, and Finland; and Part II focuses on research on new approaches to improve teacher preparation regarding family engagement.

I. Research on the state of the art of preparing pre-service teachers for FSP in initial teacher education

Despite the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for FSP in ITE being emphasised at least in theory, in practice it appears more difficult. Thompson and colleagues make a comparison between the outcomes of studies in England, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, Norway, Belgium and The Netherlands and the characteristics of country specific ITE policies, or reforms and governmental involvement. They conclude that despite the recognition of the importance of preparing for FSP in each national context at both governmental and ITE institutional levels, no satisfactory picture of FSP provision within ITE or in the preparedness of pre-service teachers to deal with the variety of complex social and cultural issues involved is found. The picture between countries was very similar, regardless of particular teacher standards or competencies related to FSP, specified by national governments and thus framing the requirements of ITE programmes, and regardless of the existence of national agencies to assess the quality of such programmes. Moreover, irrespective of whether there was a national curriculum for ITE (as in Spain) or not (as in the Netherlands), and irrespective of the duration of particular programmes or variations in the amount of attention given to FSP within them, it was true in all countries that:

- a) Preparing pre-service teachers for FSP is not sufficiently well developed;
- b) FSP preparation seems to depend upon the proclivities and expertise of individual teacher educators;
- c) According to teacher educators the lack of attention to FSP is attributed to pressures of time and other curriculum content requirements;
- d) Increasing the amount of time spent by pre-service teachers in schools does not necessarily guarantee higher quality preparation for FSP.

In addition they emphasise there is no easy solution to address this issue, due to reasons such as overloaded programmes, or priority setting. Therefore they plea on the one hand for more collaboration between teacher educators and with the schools and teachers with whom they work in order to develop a more shared and less unplanned curriculum regarding FSP. On the other hand they argue that the call from the European Commission (2013) for the promotion and support of a regular dialogue among key stakeholders, feeding into national policy-making, improving ITE programmes and supporting the development of a shared vision – with a common understanding of what is meant by quality in educating teachers – seems to be highly relevant for this element of teacher preparation.

This call and analysis reflects the outcomes of the Swiss study, the English study, the Spanish and the Finnish. In the Swiss study, Lehman discusses for the ITE programmes in the German-speaking part of Switzerland the lack of evidence of whether full required courses on FSP are more effective compared to preparing for FSP as a topic integrated in other courses.

In addition he argues that there is a need for collaboration with schools in order to support and increase the number of students' experiences with parents. Lehman concludes that most preparation of pre-service teachers depends on the actions of individual teacher educators. In this light Mutton and colleagues emphasise based on the English case that it is also about the pedagogy that is best suited to developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions of pre-

service teachers. They state: 'Tensions between content prescription and pedagogical approaches are not unusual when attempts are made to address perceived problems in the ITE curriculum'. Whereas teacher education in Switzerland is mainly offered in 'Universities of Applied Sciences' ('new' universities), the context described in Spain and Finland focused on teacher education programmes in 'research universities'. Even in these programmes and, in the Spanish context, a governmental 'prescribed' curriculum, issues are found in preparing pre-service teachers for FSP. Despite the uniformity due to state regulations they found much diversity and heterogeneity in the ITE programmes among Spanish regions. In addition Gomila and colleagues conclude most programmes focus on 'knowledge and comprehension of a family's reality, while at the same time they promote an idea of a family-school partnership based on mentoring/guidance of the family by the school, which reproduces power relations from teachers towards family. Despite the fact that the Finish study show a more positive outcome concerning the preparation of pre-service teachers for FSP in ITE programmes, Alanko emphasizes new challenges are emerging of which no sufficient preparation is established yet. Challenges like, 'the growing number of immigrants to Nordic countries presents a challenge to teachers' traditional views on family life, and cultural sensitivity is required when interacting with pupils from diverse family backgrounds'. Overall, the studies show that Evans' (2013) conclusion that within teacher education exists a struggle to address the preparation of pre-service teachers for FSP also applies for ITE programmes across Europe.

II. Research on new approaches to improve teacher preparation regarding family engagement

In the second part of this special issue studies are presented about new approaches to improve pre-service and in-service teachers' professional development concerning FSP. Whereas for example Walker and Legg describe the development of simulations to support pre-service teacher development in communicating with parents, De Coninck and colleagues describe a Video-based instrument to measure pre-service teachers' parent-teacher communication competences. These new methods not only contribute to teacher preparation for FSP, but in our opinion make a huge contribution to pedagogic approaches in teacher education. We believe that it is time to extend the discussion about whether approaches like simulations might fulfil the need of new methods for preparing teachers in other areas in a changing world/society.

Miller and colleagues emphasise the importance of and requirement for inter-professional teamwork where professionals from various disciplines work together to achieve a common goal with regard to family-school collaboration. They developed a course supporting inter-professional collaboration in education. While Miller and colleagues developed a new course De Bruïne and colleagues report on a study where only small-scale curriculum changes were allowed: a status quo which applies to many teacher programmes. In their study they describe an attempt to prepare pre-service teachers despite these limitations by focussing on supporting pre-service teachers for secondary education to become aware of the importance of working with parents, to become aware of the multidimensional and broad concept of FSP – more than just communication – and help them to formulate learning goals for further professional development on this topic during the final part of the ITE programme. Even though this study on a small-scale curriculum change show positive results and illustrates that small changes in ITE programmes can be valuable, the authors emphasize the limitations of changes regarding a sufficient preparation.

In the final contribution Joyce Epstein discusses the contributions in this special issue. She calls for new directions in ITE programmes concerning Family, school and community partnerships addressing five major points. First, she stresses to redefine the ‘professional’ of teachers. Collaborating with parents is an inevitable core professional competency of teachers. Whereas, other competencies are regularly addressed in required courses for all future teachers—e.g., methods of teaching, tests and assessments, and classroom management, preparing to engage with parents are neglected in ITE programmes. Second she pleads not to restrict FSP to individual teacher competencies but to consider FSP as an essential component of the school organization and school development. This requires attention in ITE programmes. Third, she notes that ITE programmes must take future teachers beyond routine communications with parents and learn to design and conduct goal-linked engagement activities for student learning in specific subjects. In addition she point out the lack of attention for ‘the community’ as a ‘rich and, often, untapped source of support and information, even in high-poverty locations’. Finally, she calls for more attention for in-service education too: ‘in-service education on family and community engagement has been side-lined in most schools and across countries’.

Conclusion

The call for supporting teachers’ professional development in engaging with families still applies today. On the one hand the struggle to address this issue in teacher education appears to be true of many ITE programmes in several European countries. On the other hand new methods and approaches seem to enrich teacher educators’ capacity to prepare pre-service teachers for FSP. Though sometimes in small steps these innovations still contribute to the development of the future teachers’ engagement with the neglected but important area of FSP.

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