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Preparing teacher candidates for family–school partnerships

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Previous research indicates that, while parent involvement promotes student achievement, how teacher candidates are prepared to establish family–school partnerships (FSP) is not well documented and the roles of teacher educators are often neglected. Explorative studies including curriculum analysis and focus groups of primary and secondary teacher candidates and teacher educators were conducted in three universities, one each in the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA. Data collection was designed to identify opinions towards FSP and perceived preparation for FSP. The programmes showed limited attention to aspects other than communication and FSP was not assessed. The findings indicate training is largely dependent upon the proclivities of individual teacher educators. Although all respondents acknowledged the importance of FSP, respondents of primary education held a more positive attitude towards parents than others. Hardly any differences were found between the views of candidates and educators, regardless of the programme they followed or taught.

Keywords: teacher training; family–school partnerships; teacher candidates; teacher educators

Introduction

Theory and research demonstrate that effective parent–teacher collaboration is a critical factor in the academic and social-emotional development of students in primary and secondary education (Epstein [2001] 2011; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Jeynes 2007; Uludag 2008; Hattie 2009; Evans 2013); hence, it is not surprising that national policies increasingly promote parent–teacher collaboration (e.g. Sanders and Epstein 2005; European Commission 2008; Evans 2013). In many countries including the USA, the Netherlands and Belgium, collaborating with parents is a legally required competency. For example, in the USA, the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) 'requires schools to organise and implement programmes and practices to involve families in their children's education' (Epstein and Sanders 2006, 82; Kroeger and Lash 2011; Evans 2013). More than a decade ago, scholars argued that developing productive relationships with families is part of a teacher's professional role; however, creating family–school partnerships (FSP) is challenging for teachers (Hargreaves 2000). Nevertheless, teacher education institutes (TEI's) seem to pay little attention to the preparation of prospective teachers for FSP (Epstein and Sanders 2006; Denessen et al. 2009; Evans 2013; Miller

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et al. 2013). Little is known about how teacher candidates are prepared to establish FSP and even less is known about how teacher educators' perceptions[1] of FSP influence the preparation of candidates. Researchers like Graue and Brown (2003), Sanders and Epstein (2005), Molina (2013) and Miller et al. (2013) have advocated for more research on this topic.

This article is an analysis of an explorative study of how candidates in primary and secondary education programmes are prepared for FSP. The research was conducted by a team of Belgian, Dutch and American researchers who wanted a better understanding of how their institutions prepared candidates for FSP. Formal curricula and information from focus groups with a total of 65 candidates, all in their senior year, and 32 educators were analysed.

Theoretical background

Insufficient preparation for FSP

Despite the positive effects of FSP upon student achievement (Epstein [2001] 2011; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Jeynes 2007), many studies show that preparation for it is not sufficient, and even absent in some teacher education programmes (Shartrand et al. 1997; Epstein and Sanders 2006; Ingvarson, Beavis, and Kleinhenz 2007; Hornby and Witte 2010; Evans 2013; Miller et al. 2013). According to Ingvarson and colleagues (2007), many novice teachers see room for improvement in teacher education, especially in preparing them to work with families (c.f. Hornby and Witte 2010; Evans 2013). Epstein and Sanders (2006) state that, though faculty attached importance to this topic, TEI's pay little attention to it and candidates were not well prepared. Based on a literature review, Evans (2013) concludes that, despite increased attention to family engagement in teacher education, teachers continue to feel unprepared and points out that teacher education does not address FSP in a useful way. In sum, three main reasons can be distinguished: (1) the mixed messages candidates receive in their field experiences from administrators and teaching staff, due to the diversity of definitions and attitudes regarding parents' roles these professionals hold; (2) the specific characteristics of the candidates influencing their views and attitudes and often sowing a disconnection between parents and candidates; and (3) the limited opportunities for candidates to interact directly with parents.

Mixed messages

It is not surprising that candidates receive mixed messages, given the ambiguity and complexity of the concept of FSP. For example, Fan and Chen (2001, 3) use the term 'parental involvement' and note: 'Although parental involvement is often simplistically perceived as unidimensional, in reality it is probably better to conceptualise this construct as being multifaceted in nature, because parental involvement subsumes a wide variety of parental behavioural patterns and parenting practices'. More and more researchers are pleading for a way of looking at parent involvement that justifies its multidimensional character and the fact that it consists of many activities of parents, teachers and schools (Fan and Chen 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002). In this light Epstein (1995) describes home, school and community as 'overlapping spheres of influence', where members should collaborate for students'

benefit through six types of involvement: parenting at home; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making and advocacy; and collaborating with community. She emphasises the reciprocity and equality of this relationship.

Although Epstein's model helps to define the multidimensional concept of FSP, other researchers have maintained that it is not sufficient for a full understanding of its complexity. Kroeger and Lash (2011, 270) argue that Epstein's model contains:

> […] ideologies of dominant power relations paralleling that of the larger society. Because schooling is a major force in transmitting the dominant culture, the notion of cultural capital creates wide disparities among parents depending on how school personnel respond to parent demands when parents attempt to advocate for children.

Generally, in these partnerships parents are 'placed in a position to 'listen to the authority' of teachers […] and teachers in a position to speak' (ibidem, 270). They argue that within Epstein's conceptual framework, the roles of parents and teachers implicitly mirror these existing power relations. Candidates encounter these relations during their field experiences and therefore educators should make these explicit for candidates.

Moreover, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argue parents and teachers might have different goals, agendas and attitudes towards parent involvement, providing candidates mixed messages too. For example, teachers might consider involvement of parents as a way to improve student achievement, to reduce costs or to address cultural disadvantages. Parents, on the other hand, could consider involvement primarily as a way to discuss their children's progress or difficulties and to share their concerns. Additionally, they state that:

> Teachers and parents each bring to the melting pot of parental involvement personal attitudes that are deeply rooted within their own historical, economic, educational, ethnic, class and gendered experiences. There persists amongst many teachers a deficit model of parents which is manifested through attitudes whereby parents are viewed as 'problems', 'vulnerable', or 'less able' and are therefore best kept out of schools. (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, 45)

They even emphasise that language can influence attitudes towards FSP and point out that the words used to define teacher–parent relations affect those relations. For example, placing teachers in the role of professionals and experts implies that parents' role is that of non-expert. Candidates need to become aware that these differences in goals, agenda's and attitudes provide mixed messages and might, according to Hornby and Lafaele, become a barrier for FSP.

The complexity of the concept and the unacknowledged power relations between parents and teachers contribute to the challenges TEI's face to address FSP. Candidates need to be aware of this complexity in order to understand the mixed messages provided by schools and teachers. In fact educators should encourage and support candidates to develop their own concepts and views about FSP to manage those mixed messages.

Specific characteristics of candidates

In facilitating candidates to understand mixed messages and to develop their own views educators should consider the specific characteristics of the candidates. Their

status (mostly single, white, middle-class and childless females in their early twenties) is likely to influence these views, as pointed out by Flanigan (2007, 96) when she underlines that 'preservice teachers have difficulty transferring their need for independence from their parents to the need for involvement with the parents of their students'. Graue and Brown (2003) emphasise that, even before entering their training programme, candidates have opinions about education and FSP, often based on their memories of going to school, their concepts of good teachers and themselves as prospective teachers. The socialcultural background of candidates influences those opinions. If candidates expect relationships with parents will be stressful, 'characterised by conflicts and criticism' (Baum and Swick 2008, 580) and if little attention is paid to these already existing views, it is not likely these views will change during teacher preparation (Graue and Brown 2003; Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Baum and Swick 2008). Therefore, candidates should be encouraged to become aware of their pre-existing opinions.

In addition, Graue and Brown (2003, 721) argue: 'Without content knowledge focused on family school relationships, preservice teachers must rely on what they already know, which is likely to mirror their own experience'. In other words, facilitating these young and middle-class candidates to understand the mixed messages and to develop grounded views, knowledge should be provided. Researchers have supported inclusion of knowledge regarding various components of FSP in the curriculum: models and factors related to working with families (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Driessen, Smit, and Sleegers 2005; Baum and Swick 2008; Bartels and Eskow 2010; Hornby and Lafaele 2011), the benefits of FSP (Epstein [2001] 2011; Hattie 2009) and theories supporting communication with parents (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Graham-Clay 2005; Bartels and Eskow 2010). However, little is known how this inclusion of knowledge in the curriculum is perceived by these candidates and their educators.

Opportunities for interaction with parents

Gaining knowledge merely from reading textbooks doesn't automatically lead to comprehension. Candidates should have opportunities for simulated and real encounters with parents. Field experiences help them to develop the skills needed to establish effective partnerships, to give meaning to the knowledge they gained and to deepen and ground their views (e.g. Shartrand et al. 1997; Epstein and Sanders 2006; Bingham and Abernathy 2007; Flanigan 2007; Uludag 2008; Bartels and Eskow 2010; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2013). Field experiences should include comprehensive and prolonged interactions with parents (Baum and Swick 2008; Pushor 2011). Graue and Brown (2003) maintain that a variety of such experiences allows candidates to discover the complexity of parenting and gather knowledge about the diverse cultural backgrounds of parents. According to Miller et al. (2013), field experiences should not only take place within the school, but in community and home settings as well. However, most candidates have limited opportunities for this kind of direct interaction with parents (Evans 2013).

Educators

Next to the content of the curriculum, educators are a defining factor for successful preparation for FSP, because they bring the curriculum to life. Little is known,

however, about how educators feel about FSP and knowledge about their concepts is lacking. If they do not think it is important, it will influence their teaching. Educators should be aware of mainstream practices of parent–teacher partnerships as a visible set of 'discourse practices that reproduce a set of power relations embodied in technical processes' (Kroeger and Lash 2011, 270). They are considered role models (e.g. Loughran and Berry 2005; Pushor 2011) and if they hold negative opinions about FSP, their students may adopt a similar attitude. Willemse, Lunenberg, and Korthagen (2008) argue that educators express their personal values and opinions in their teaching. The language used in lectures referring to parents affects the attitudes and assumptions of their students as much as the content of the curriculum, or even more (Kroeger and Lash 2011). If educators merely talk about 'difficult parents', they implicitly teach that parents are a problem, thus contributing to a negative attitude towards FSP on the part of candidates.

This study

Teacher preparation is failing to adequately address FSP and more research on this topic is needed (Evans 2013). Little is known about what according to candidates will facilitate their development in working with families and how educators perceive their role. In order to gain a better understanding how candidates are prepared for FSP, an explorative study was conducted in three universities focusing on the perceptions of candidates and their educators. Formal curricula were examined; candidates and educators were asked how they perceived candidates' preparation to work with parents and their level of preparedness. The central question in this study concerns: 'How are teacher candidates in these three universities prepared for FSP?

  (1) What can be found in the formal curriculum regarding FSP?
  (2) What are the views and opinions of both candidates and educators concerning FSP?
  (3) How do candidates and educators perceive the preparation for FSP in their training programmes?

Methods

Context

In 2012 explorative studies were conducted in the teacher education departments in three universities, one each in Belgium, the Netherlands and the USA. The Belgian university is a university of applied sciences in the northern part of Belgium (Flanders). The Department of Education prepares approximately 2300 candidates within three-year bachelor programmes for pre-school, primary and secondary education and one advanced programme in special education. In the Netherlands, a university of applied sciences in the north-eastern part of the country participated. Within the Department of Education approximately 7000 candidates are prepared for different positions within primary, secondary, vocational or special education at bachelor and masters level in several four-year bachelor and one-year master programmes. The US university is a comprehensive public institution on the East coast where 1551 undergraduate and graduate students participate in pre-school, primary, secondary or special education programmes for teacher training, leading to bachelor

and master degrees. In contrast to the other two universities, all candidates must take two years of general education classes and complete an academic major before entering the two-year teacher education programme.

The choice of this international study was based on several factors. In all three countries, working with parents is legally required and questions occurred about how teachers are prepared to meet this mandate. Besides, the universities are linked by mutual partnerships including regular international exchange of students and educators. We assumed that based on cultural differences, teacher preparation on FSP could differ and perhaps adaptations of the curriculum were needed for the exchange students. Thus, the selection of cases was a result of convenience (Miles and Huberman 1984).

Data collection

Data were collected by examining the required teacher education courses at each university. Focus groups were conducted with both educators and senior teacher candidates to obtain information about their opinions concerning FSP, the curriculum and if they felt their preparation was sufficient.

The formal curriculum

Curricula were examined by reviewing course syllabi in the compulsory courses in order to determine what topics were covered, what kind of teaching strategies were used and if competencies in any aspect of FSP were assessed. In addition, electronic databases were studied to explore programme parts, using search terms like parents, parent involvement or communication with parents. Two researchers checked the course overview.

The perceived curriculum and concepts concerning FSP

Because the aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of educators and candidates regarding preparation for FSP, focus groups were conducted. A focus group is, according to Rabiee (2004, 655) citing Lederman, 'a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic'. In other words, the focus groups are considered to be what Swanborn (2008, 61; e.g. Miles and Huberman 1984; Eisenhardt 2002) calls 'cases of high intensity', consisting of a rich illustrative variety of information to understand the phenomenon more in depth. Due to the explorative nature of this study, focus groups were conducted, because interaction between the group members is encouraged and this interaction could provide deeper and richer information than could be obtained from individual interviews (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). Each university conducted four focus groups, a primary and a secondary group for at least 5 educators and 10 candidates each.

Educators who were engaged in the topic of FSP were invited to participate, on the assumption that these educators in particular could provide information about educators' views and opinions. Senior teacher candidates were invited by email and because it was difficult to find 10 participants, a second invitation was sent. All focus group meetings were held in 2012 and took from one to two hours. All

questions were grouped around three topics: views and opinions, the perceived curriculum and opportunities to learn about FSP in real-life experiences within k-12 schools.

To elicit respondents' views and opinions they were asked what came to mind when thinking about collaborating with parents, if they considered it important and, if so, why it was important. To gather information about the perceived curriculum, respondents were asked what topics related to FSP were covered by the curriculum. In addition, topics as proposed by Epstein, Sanders, and Clark (1999) were presented, because according to them these topics are necessary to address in teacher preparation. The aim of presenting these topics was to verify whether they were actually recognised as part of the curriculum. Respondents were asked if candidates were encouraged to develop a view of FSP and if their programmes provided possibilities for contacts with parents. Finally, both educators and candidates were asked if they thought the programme prepared candidates sufficiently for FSP and what changes on this topic were needed. The meetings were recorded and answers were written on flip charts during the meetings. A total of 65 candidates and 32 educators participated in the focus groups held at the three universities (Table 1).

Of the candidates 84% were female; 95% were between 20 and 25 years old. Thirteen educators mentioned being parents themselves. Most had been primary or secondary teachers and taught general subjects in educational and pedagogical sciences.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in two stages. First, two researchers at each university analysed and ordered data obtained by the focus groups. An inductive analysis (Patton 2002) was followed to find out if the data would provide categories (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). Building on individual coding of the texts, categories were developed in relation to the research questions. Within each university one researcher took the lead in the analysis. A second researcher checked the analysis at random points. If the two researchers agreed on the analysis, the first researcher continued analysing; if they did not agree on the analysis of this random points, the second researcher analysed the other parts as well.

In the second stage, all researchers came together. Results and categories obtained were compared and differences were discussed and resolved. Categories were adjusted, results were ordered by research questions, conclusions were drawn by pairs of researchers and then checked by other pairs. In summary, triangulation of data sources, data analysis and researchers was used (Patton 2002; Yin 2002).

Table 1.   Respondents focus groups.

	Belgium	the Netherlands	USA	Total
Primary candidates	16	8	18	*42*
Secondary candidates	11	9	3	*23*
Total	27	17	21	65
Primary educators	4	4	10	*18*
Secondary educators	4	5	5	*14*
Total	8	9	15	32

Findings

FSP in the formal curriculum

Though there were no specific courses on this topic, all three universities had a few required courses containing subjects linked to FSP (Table 2). Apart from these compulsory courses, elements of FSP occurred in a few non-compulsory courses.

A close examination of courses (Tables 3 and 4) reveals that attention is limited to elements of FSP, particularly to communication. For example, in courses about general competencies these elements concerned teachers' ability to communicate with parents in order to inform them about their child or the school programme. There were no references made to partnerships with parents (Epstein [2001] 2011) or to the power relations Kroeger and Lash (2011) describe.

In terms of teaching strategies, the US and Belgium put an emphasis on lectures and discussion, whereas the Netherlands uses mainly role-playing and non-compulsory assignments in field experiences. There was no assessment of a student's ability to work with families in any of the universities.

In summary, there was an amazing similarity in the curricula of the universities in the United States and Europe. Developing reciprocal partnerships with families was not mentioned, one way communication from teacher to parent was the norm and there were no graded assignments on this topic. This is remarkable, since in all three countries, collaborating with parents is one of the teacher competencies required by law.

Focus groups

Opinions and views

During the focus groups, respondents were asked for their opinions and views concerning FSP and if they considered it important. When asked 'what comes to mind?', candidates as well as educators primarily mentioned communication and giving information to parents. At the primary level, candidates and educators emphasised the mutual character of this communication, using words like 'consulting parents' or 'using the expertise of parents'. In contrast, secondary respondents used more phrases like 'parents should support the school' (Table 5).

Both educators and candidates expressed myriad concerns about difficulties with parents. They felt that parents might be scary and intimidating, partly because they are older than candidates and of the same age as their own parents. 'Teachers are fearful about working with parents. Schools are scapegoated and blame is put on teachers for students who fail to learn or have behaviour problems', an educator in

Table 2.   Courses (overview).

	Length programme in years (primary and secondary	Primary		Secondary	
		Total amount of courses	FSP linked to other courses	Total amount of courses	FSP linked to other courses
BE	3	40	6	37	1
NL	4	56	5	60	2
US	2	10	4	7	4

Table 3. compulsory courses (primary), connecting subject with FSP.

	Content in the context of a course concerning							Teaching strategy			
Amount of courses	General professional competencies	Communication	Subject-based courses	Early childhood	Consulting parents of at risk students	SEN	Inclusion	Field experience	Role playing	Lectures; discussion	Other
BE 6	2			1	1	1	1	1		4	1
NL 5	2	1		1	1			4	1		
US 5	1		3				1	1		4	

Table 4. Compulsory courses (secondary), connecting subject with FSP.

	Content in the context of a course concerning						Teaching strategy			
Amount of courses	General professional competencies	Subject-based courses	Consulting parents of at risk students	SEN	Inclusion	Field experience	Role playing	Lectures; discussion	Other
BE 1	1							1	
NL 2	1						1	1	
US 4	2	2				1		3	

Table 5.   Opinions; views.

	Primary		Secondary	
	Candidates	Educators	Candidates	Educators
Communication	x	x	x	x
Two-way communication	x	x		
Using parents' expertise about their child	x	x		
Useful for primary education- and SEN-students			x	x
Volunteering	x	x		
Involved in governance and decision-making			x	x

the US reported. Many secondary candidates and educators stated FSP is mainly an issue for primary, not for secondary teachers. They made an exception for students with problems: 'Yes, with students with special needs you have to collaborate with parents, with other students I don't think it's that necessary', a secondary candidate (the Netherlands) said. Some even argued that parent involvement for teenagers is not necessary any more. Primary respondents related FSP with volunteering, while secondary respondents did not. They felt parents hardly ever come to secondary schools, though they mentioned parents serving on school committees and exerting influence on school governance. When asked if and why they thought FSP is important, all respondents stated that it is important and an essential part of the teachers' profession, saying, for example, 'You can achieve a lot more when parents are involved' (secondary candidate, Belgium), or even: 'It makes you a better teacher' (primary educator, the Netherlands).

Only modest differences were found between candidates and their educators, and between the respondents of three universities. Most differences however were found between the primary and secondary respondents. All respondents expressed fear towards parents; however, primary candidates and educators at all three universities stated that collaborating with parents is needed and can be a positive, valuable contribution to everyday teaching. 'Parents and teachers have to collaborate as a team' said an educator (primary level, the Netherlands). Generally, respondents at the secondary level did not articulate general positive opinions like that.

Curriculum as perceived, perceived preparedness and proposed changes

To explore the perceived preparation of candidates, respondents were asked what topics related to FSP were covered by the curriculum, how these were taught and assessed and if there were opportunities for field experiences. Moreover, they were asked if candidates were encouraged to develop a view concerning FSP and their prospective role in these partnerships. Finally, the discussion was brought up if they felt preparation for FSP was sufficient and if they have suggestions for improvement?

All respondents reported topics related to communication. Only a few respondents mentioned other topics such as diversity. This corresponds with the focus on communication found in the formal curricula. However, when given some topics mentioned by Epstein, Sanders, and Clark (1999)[2] most respondents at the primary level, candidates as well as educators, suddenly recognised nearly all as part of the

programme. Secondary respondents recognised only a few of them, mainly as a part of a non-compulsory course. Interestingly, these 'Epstein topics' were not found in the formal curricula. This seems to suggest there is a difference between the formal curriculum and the curriculum as performed and might indicate that preparing for FSP also depends on the unplanned teaching practices of individual educators. Many respondents emphasised the influence of individual educators. Generally, educators saw themselves as role models for their students, realising the impact of their views: 'We are sometimes negative role models ourselves, because we often refer to parents as being difficult' (primary level, the Netherlands). Some educators said they were using, often unintentionally, their own experiences as a parent in their lectures. Moreover, educators pointed out that they never discuss their vision of parent involvement with their colleagues. An educator in the Netherlands wondered: 'What's actually our shared view of FSP? We never discuss that in our team'.

When asked if the preparation for FSP was adequate, all respondents indicated that candidates were not sufficiently prepared, saying there is little attention paid to it in the teacher-training programme, nor at the schools. Many respondents offered suggestions for improvement (Table 6). They said there should be more and above all less noncommittal attention to FSP. According to the educators, however, more attention might be a problem, due to the already heavily loaded programme. They suggested integrating FSP in other courses.

Educators in all focus groups mentioned candidates should gain more theoretical knowledge about the benefits of FSP on student achievement, about working with minority families and the legal position of parents in schools. Moreover, they recommended additional attention to the development of opinions, views and attitudes for example, seeing parents as experts on their child. They advised that candidates needed to become more aware of cultural differences and of their susceptibility to stereotyping. Moreover, educators argued that candidates should develop a vision about education that connects their future role as a teacher with FSP. This is remarkable because their own views hardly differed from the views of candidates.

In general, candidates placed less importance on the development of opinions and knowledge than did their educators. Quite the contrary, they seemed content with the degree to which they were encouraged to develop a vision and a positive attitude regarding FSP. What they wanted was more training of their (communication) skills, like making and maintaining contact, giving positive feedback to parents and dealing with parents in difficult, problematic situations. A candidate wanted

Table 6.   Suggestions for improvement.

Changes needed	Primary		Secondary	
	Candidates	Educators	Candidates	Educators
More compulsory courses	x	x	x	x
More time	x		x	
More attention, integrated in existing courses		x		x
More skills (communication)	x		x	
More knowledge		x		x
More development of views; positive attitude		x		x
Field experiences	x	x	x	x

'more role playing, because you learn to dare it; then you feel less shy or anxious when you actual do it' (primary level, the Netherlands).

All respondents wanted more meetings with parents at school. Learning by doing, they all thought, was the best, most powerful and realistic way to learn about FSP: 'It's less scary when you have trained with parents before you start working as a teacher' (candidate, secondary level, Belgium). However, respondents said contacts between candidates and parents are rare, not significant, and often unplanned, depending upon school policy, mentoring teachers at schools or the candidates themselves. 'It is difficult to show this competency, because we hardly ever practiced - my coach at school just said: 'I know you didn't have the opportunity, but I'm sure you're able to collaborate with parents, so I′ll give you a good mark for it'', said a candidate (secondary level, the Netherlands).

Conclusions and discussion

In this explorative study, preparation of pre-service teachers for FSP was examined within three teacher education institutions. Findings indicate that preparation for FSP is integrated in other courses. Attention is mainly focused on communication, there is no attention to models of FSP or to address underlying power relationships or barriers and there is no assessment on this topic. In primary programmes, more attention is paid to FSP then in secondary progammes. In addition, secondary respondents articulated fewer positive opinions than primary respondents. Moreover, differences were found between the formal curriculum and the curriculum as performed. Preparation for FSP seemed to depend on concepts and (unplanned) teaching practices of individual educators. Educators and candidates considered FSP important, but difficult to establish, often describing parents as frightening. Remarkably, hardly any differences were found between the opinions of candidates and their educators. Finally, all respondents felt preparation was inadequate. They called for more and less noncommittal attention to FSP and more actual experience.

In this explorative study, only 65 candidates and 32 educators participated; therefore, no generalisations can be made to all candidates and educators at the three universities, or to all teacher education institutions in the three countries. Nevertheless, the lack of attention to FSP in the curricula in this study and the insufficient preparation for FSP as perceived by candidates and educators are consistent with other studies (Epstein and Sanders 2006; Denessen et al. 2009; Evans 2013) and seem to confirm that preparing teachers for FSP is a difficult, persistent and widespread problem.

This study reveals that limited concepts concerning FSP are included in the formal curricula and expressed by candidates and their educators. Two examples might illustrate this. First FSP is merely regarded as communication with parents. In fact candidates and educators requested even more training of communication skills, role playing and field experiences with opportunities to meet parents. Adding only more communication training and encounters with parents, however, is not sufficient for adequate preparation (Kroeger and Lash 2011). Secondly, another limited concept is expressed by secondary respondents emphasising that FSP is above all meant for primary education. The university curricula mirrored that view, and concomitantly FSP was hardly a topic in secondary programmes. Evans (2013) has solid reasons to ask for more research on FSP in relation to secondary education.

Yet preparation for FSP fails if the concept is not grounded in an understanding of the needs and aims of establishing valuable partnerships (Epstein [2001] 2011), the levels of involvement, the complexity of parent–teachers relations and existing barriers (c.f. Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Kroeger and Lash 2011). In this study, these aspects were hardly ever mentioned in the focus groups, nor did they show up in the formal curricula. Candidates should be encouraged through the curriculum to gain knowledge about these aspects of FSP in order to develop a more grounded view. Reconsidering the curricula on these points will improve preparation for FSP.

Moreover, the age of candidates should be taken into account, as shown by Flanigan (2007) and Graue and Brown (2003). In line with their results, candidates in this study often saw parents as scary and intimidating. Teacher education institutions should provide opportunities for candidates to meet parents within and outside the schools (Evans 2013; Miller et al. 2013), coached by educators, who can prepare them for these encounters and encourage them to reflect on these experiences afterwards, in order to relate these experiences to their role as (prospective) teacher (e.g. Kroeger and Lash 2011). Real-life experiences, taking place in authentic situations, were one of the improvements suggested by nearly all respondents. TEI's and schools should collaborate, not only in order to realise these field experiences, but even to design the FSP-part of the programme. This might lead to a shared sense of responsibility between TEI's and schools upon candidates' development of competencies needed for FSP and impact the views of all involved, of educators, candidates, and of the schools as well.

The call of Kroeger and Lash (2011) for more awareness of educators of mainstream parent–teacher partnerships including the underlying power relations seems to apply to this study too. In this study, especially educators who felt engaged in FSP were invited for the focus groups. However, even their views and opinions did not really differ from the views of candidates, and even they struggled with the question of how to prepare candidates for FSP and support them to develop their views and attitudes. They acknowledged their own, sometimes negative, modelling; for example, by the language they used in talking about 'difficult parents'. This illustrates that even teacher education may contribute to the barriers to FSP distinguished by Hornby and Lafaele (2011). If the mixed messages candidates get from schools are not addressed by educators, if educators do not encourage candidates to explore their own preconceptions and develop a positive view and if they continue to refer to parents as being troublesome and difficult, candidates will see their preconceived notions confirmed (Graue and Brown 2003; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Kroeger and Lash 2011).

Although educators in this study emphasised the need for more attention to FSP, they also mentioned a loaded curriculum and suggested integrating FSP in other subjects. This may however continue the current fragmented and limited attention paid to it (Epstein and Sanders 2006). Moreover, integration in other courses and addressing FSP sufficiently needs educators who are convinced of the importance of FSP and know how to combine and integrate their own subject with FSP. In this study engaged educators already struggled addressing FSP. In other words, educators who are not that engaged to this subject might struggle even more or simply omit FSP in their teaching practises, in particular when, as emphasised by the participating educators, a shared vision on preparing for FSP is lacking.

In line with Flanigan (2007), focus group discussions appear to be a useful way to foster educator's awareness. During the focus groups and the presentation of the 'Epstein-topics', some of the educators became more aware of their opinions and practices and realised they paid more attention to FSP than was prescribed by the curriculum and even more than they thought they did, bringing, for example, their own experiences as parents into their lectures. These findings show that teaching about FSP appears partly unplanned and unconscious, depending on the educators' individual experiences. Repeating focus groups could have provided a deeper understanding of educators' opinions and perceived practices, but did not fit in the scope of this explorative study. Nevertheless, if discussing about FSP and exchanging experiences in a well-structured way leads to a greater sense of awareness, than conducting meetings like these focus groups might be a powerful tool for improving the preparation for FSP. Exchanging teaching experiences, views and opinions concerning FSP with colleagues might even support nonengaged educators to develop a (shared) vision. However, in this study educators emphasised a shortage of time for meetings like this and exchanging these opinions and experiences. Hence, integration FSP in other courses without giving teams of educators the opportunity to develop a well-balanced and shared view on this topic hardly guarantees good preparation for FSP.

The lack of shared views and the important role of individual educators might indicate an even more extensive issue in teacher education, namely the absence of improvement of educators' teaching practices by collaborating and exchanging experiences. In this study, educators emphasised there is hardly any time for collaboration and development of shared visions. This may lead to individual unplanned and unconscious practices of educators as found in this study. These practices are, for example, also described in relation to moral education and citizenship (Willemse, Lunenberg, and Korthagen 2008) and to modelling (Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Swennen 2007). The critical role of individual educators and the lack of collaborative exchange about educators' visions and practices refer to a bigger issue. More research is needed about how changes can be made in teacher education and how educators can be supported, through collaboration, to address issues such as FSP in a more meaningful way.

Notes

1. In this article 'teachers educators' will be referred to as 'educators' and 'teacher candidates' as 'candidates'.
2. Examples of those topics are: 'How to conduct parent meetings'; 'Answering parents' questions about raising children'. These questions correspond with the Epsteins' six types of involvement.

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