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Competences of pre-school teachers for working with students' families

Introduction

School and family are the two basic environments for the child's development and upbringing. The effectiveness of the interaction between the school and the family is determined by mutual and close cooperation. Home, school and community are 'overlapping spheres of influence', where members should collaborate for student's benefit through six types of involvement: parenting at home; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making and advocacy; and collaborating with community (Epstein 1995).

Proper, clear cooperation between teachers and parents should lead to the integration of didactic and educational activities. Teacher's cooperation with parents is a prerequisite for successful didactic and educational work. Teacher and family partnerships contribute to mutual understanding and cooperation for children's academic performance and well-being in school (Denessen 2009; Desforges et al. 2003; Epstein et al. 2002; Fan et al. 2001; Jeynes 2005).

The importance of developing a good relationship between parents and school cannot be overlooked. A good relationship between parents and a school teacher is the basis for successful development of children's potential. Cooperation of parents and school in raising children, regardless of its forms and practices, always benefits children. The most popular forms of cooperation in this field include volunteering, interactive works, lifelong learning, etc. Teaching and raising children requires good will, understanding of the other side, proper communication, agreement and philosophy of cooperation based on a deeply thought-out idea of educational community, taking responsibility for the process of education and upbringing by all those interested in it (Mendel 2007). Teachers and parents are natural allies, partners sharing common experiences and having a common goal – a child's success. Parents want to learn their role, be responsible and participate in building a civil society and civic participation, among others, by entering the role of a pupil's parents, different from the one they had before they enrolled the child in school. School education of a child is an element of the public sphere on which parents' identity is built. Therefore, parents and teachers should get to know each other, see

the meaning of joint activities, cooperate with the pupil's closest surroundings to meet the requirements of modern education.

There are a number of studies which focus on family-school cooperation issues in teacher education (Bruïne et al. 2014; Kroeger et al. 2011), and this issue is highlighted in the national educational policies as well (Dusi 2012; Evans 2013; Lehmann 2016; European Commission 2008).

The Netherlands, for example, have formulated the national standards for teachers' competences in communicating with parents (Denessen 2009).

Good practices in creating parents-school partnership are demonstrated by the National Parents-School Associations functioning in several countries. The US and the UK are reported to have the biggest successful experience in this field. The activities of these Associations resulted in developing National Standards for Family and School Partnerships, which include three steps: 1. Raising awareness of the power of family and community involvement; 2. Taking action to cultivate involvement through specific programs and practices; 3. Celebrating success as your school sees increased involvement and its impact (National PTN 2009).

Developing productive relationships with families is the number one point of attention for scholars, teachers and teacher educators, but unfortunately this topic is still challenging and problematic (Evans 2013; Bruïne et al. 2014; Egger et al. 2015). A lot of studies have shown insufficient attention of teacher education institutes to preparation of prospective teachers for family and school partnership (Epstein et al. 2006; Denessen et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2013). Many novice teachers express the need in special preparing to work with parents (Hornby et al. 2010). Teachers still feel unprepared for partnership with families (Ewan 2013, Epstein et al. 2006).

This article is an attempt to analyse the research into the readiness of students – future teachers – for communicative interaction between the actors of educational process in school. Formal curricula and information from focus groups with a total of 120 respondents were analysed.

The research was conducted by a team of researchers from the Pedagogical University of Cracow eager to better understand how their institution prepares future teachers for cooperation with students' families.

Despite a solid theoretical background about family-school cooperation, novice teachers still do not feel well prepared for collaboration with families.

The purpose of our research has been to study the level of preparedness of students as future teachers for professional activity in a modern school. The main objective was also focused on the curricula and educational teacher training programs taking into consideration the importance of their adequate professional training and realization in universities.

Polish educational system towards family–school interactions

The Polish educational system has also accumulated some experience in development of cooperation between school teachers and parents. There were a few European projects realized on this topic, for example in the framework program Life Long Education; a lot of research was done into the general issue on building partnership

relations between a teacher and the student's parents, which resulted in numerous scientific and methodological articles, scientific degree theses and practical guidelines for teachers (Hernik et al. 2015).

In Poland, crossing the school's threshold is perceived as a situation in which the focus is exclusively on students. Meanwhile, parents are also the participants of this process. The ritual of starting education in a Polish school is often associated with the absolutely unnecessary detachment of children from parents. Therefore, it is necessary to change this ritual by including parents into the adaptation programs at school and involve them in the educational process aimed at adapting them to their new role of the student's parent. Mutual rights and duties of parents and school are the content of legal regulations, and their polemics and current problems are available, *inter alia*, on the Internet. In general terms, when talking about the legal situation, it should be noted that parents in Poland are part of the school society – they are, like students and teachers, a part of the community, which in the social sense is the school. Polish teachers often know little about their students. Therefore, they do not organize enough activities that allow students to get to know each other, their personalities or interests. Meanwhile, cooperation with parents in terms of diagnosing, sharing knowledge about the child and experiences related to supporting their development are among the easiest ways to shape well-functioning student communities (Mendel 2010).

Many Polish researchers (Winiarski 2000; Mendel 2005) show that parents do not regard the school as a friendly place – they do not feel comfortable while being at school and only come there when they have to. Hence, the researchers refer to the so-called “parents’ pro-school passivity” and try to find out its conditions. Consideration of these conditions from different perspectives is mainly related to the permanent failure to meet parents’ and school’s expectations, the lack of active listening to each other, as well as the progressive pauperization of society on the one hand and growing consumerism on the other, and, finally, the changes in the family lifestyle. Nalaskowski (2002) adds that the school space “speaks” and it is doing so in a certain tone indicating the power relationship that characterizes this reality, e.g. the school space “orders” a teacher and the principal to treat a parent as a student, infantilizes, for example, by forcing parents into children’s chairs too small for them during the parent-teacher meetings. Therefore, the phenomenon of parents’ pro-school passivity may take place and it is the result of close relationship between the student’s and the parent’s activity, and the place that they occupy in the classroom – the school room. In addition, it is also necessary to consider the goals of parent’s visit to the school – usually they come to see the area where his child is staying (classroom, common room) or they have an appointment with the teacher, principal (teacher’s room, principal’s office) or to talk with the custodian (cloakroom). It leads to the situation when a parent comes to school because of a child and a teacher, even without a second parent, or to meet with other parents who form a school community (Nalaskowski 2002). There are also schools in which teachers organize various forms of participation in the educational process of children, including parental participation in conducting certain activities, parents’ help in accomplishing educational plans of the teacher (most often assisting in activities

with children). In addition, the developed method of student assessment is based on a descriptive assessment in which parents also participate. In this type of action, both parents and teachers recognize that joint diagnosing of a child's development and sharing knowledge about it, agreeing on common behavior towards the child and co-deciding the educational plans are important for the development of their child's personality. Parents' cooperation with the school's principal in the decision-making process concerning the teaching staff, changes in the curricula, and introduction of extracurricular classes is also important. Many parents are looking for schools that meet their requirements related to their values and needs, as well as a sense of shared responsibility for the school's affairs, knowledge of the child's educational concept, a sense of co-deciding about the organization and functioning of the school, a sense of connection between their own and school's aspirations, recognition of cooperation with teachers (Mendel 2005).

Teacher training programs in Polish educational environment

By now, there are five Public Pedagogical Universities in Poland (tab.1) (Ministry of Higher Education of Poland 2018). But only a few of them provide end-to-end teacher education for all school levels (kindergarten, primary and secondary) and only the Pedagogical University of Cracow offers teaching specialization as an additional selective program after graduating which provides teacher's license.

Table 1. Public Pedagogical Universities in Poland

Name of university	site	Region of Poland
The Maria Grzegorzewska Pedagogical University	http://www.aps.edu.pl	Warsaw, central Poland
Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa	http://www.en.ajd.czyst.pl	Częstochowa, South-Western Poland
Pedagogical University of Cracow	www.up.krakow.pl	Krakow, Central-Southern Poland
Pomeranian University in Słupsk	https://www.apsl.edu.pl/	Słupsk, Northern Poland
Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities	https://www.uph.edu.pl	Siedlce, North-Eastern Poland

In some of the Polish pedagogical universities secondary teacher education is organized at university level, but not by the special unit – Institute of Teacher Preparing like in The Pedagogical University of Cracow.

As a matter of fact, there is no national curriculum for Teacher specialization, but there are National Qualification Framework (2011) where they gather the basis of the main professional competencies and the curricula requirements. Regulations are just on a formal level.

At the kindergarten and primary school level, the curricula are designed as three-years-Bachelor studies. A master diploma is required for teachers at the secondary school level. Students major in two school subjects, at least.

The Educational Teacher Program conducted in the Institute of Teacher Training of Pedagogical University of Cracow was created according to the National Qualification Framework (2011) and was amplified by some additional directives

of Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education. On the whole, it consists of pedagogical and psychological module (10 ECTS) and didactical and practical module (15 ECTS). Pedagogical and psychological module is implemented by the theoretical courses like Basics of Psychology (the main course and the special course for primary school) – 4 ECTS, Educational Conceptions and Practices (the main course and the course for primary and secondary schools) – 5 ECTS, Safety and Hygiene of students and teachers working – 1 ECTS. Didactical and Practical module is realized by the theoretical course Didactic (the basic course and the course for particular school subjects) – 8 ECTS and the school training practice – 7 ECTS (Tab.2).

Table 2. Analyses of Teacher Training Program at the Pedagogical University of Cracow

Modules	Courses	ECTS
Pedagogical and psychological module (10 ECTS)	Basic of Psychology (<i>main course and course for primary school</i>)	4
	Educational Conceptions and Practices (<i>main course and course for primary and secondary schools</i>)	5
	Safety and Hygiene of students and teachers working	1
Didactical and practical module (15 ECTS)	Didactic (<i>basic course and course for particular school subjects</i>)	8
	School in-field training	7

As a result, after completing the Teacher Training Program students acquire teacher's competences (specified knowledge, teacher skills and abilities). After completing such program in the Institute of Teacher Training at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, students receive license for secondary school level teacher.

The Study

The present study reports the first data or rather statements from an ongoing study (n=150) piloting large scale longitudinal qualitative student interviews between 2018–2019. The first part of the research started in 2018 with the aim to get better understanding how Polish pre-teachers are ready to work with future students' parents and local communities and how teacher education programs address this topic.

Methodology

To achieve research goals, the surveys and document analysis were carried out. Students of different specializations of the Pedagogical University of Cracow (Poland) were examined (tab. 2). The research was focused mostly on bachelor and MSc/MA students who completed the first part of the teacher training program which they do in parallel to their major program. The sample was organized in accordance with convenience-voluntary sampling scheme (Gravetter, Forzano 2010; Weathington et al. 2010). The sample included participants who: (1) provided a written consent to participate in the study; (2) were students of any field of study but only in teaching profile, i.e. profile that prepares graduates to work as teachers.

Table 3. Overview on returns by the respondents

Program	Specialization	Number of the students
Bachelor	Biology and nature protection	30
	Mathematics	15
	German Philology	40
	Philosophy	10
	Animation of culture	15
MSc/MA	Mathematic	10
	English Philology	30

The data were collected from analyzing the student's eases with their self-evaluation as future teachers. The main points which were explored dealt with how well the students – future teachers are prepared for working with parents; their self-assessment of the level of preparedness for family-school partnership and how future teachers assess their preparation for cooperation with parents in their training programs?

To assess the curriculum content of the teacher training programs, relevant course documents have been collected as well as the additional information on the content and aims of the training program.

Results

In this article, we present some preliminary results on certain aspects of the study. Our respondents confirmed the results of other authors (Lehmann 2016; Kroeger 2011) about the importance of the topic Family-school partnership in teachers' pre-service training (tab. 4).

Table 4. Analysis of surveys based on studying the eases with student self-evaluation as future teachers

Questions	Answers (%)		
	Yes	Rather yes	No
Is family-school cooperation an important professional topic for future teachers?	95	5	-
Is it difficult for you to organize some meetings and/or discussions with parents of your future students?	65	20	15
Is it important to demonstrate communicative skill with parents during practical training in school?	15	40	45
Should family-school cooperation play a more important role in teacher curriculum	25	60	15

However, only 15% of the respondents stated that it is very important for students to demonstrate this skill during their practical training in school, whereas 40% viewed it as moderately important; 45% do not have an opinion on this issue. Addressees were also asked if the subject of family-school cooperation should be more prominent in their future curricula, either as a full course on the topic, or integrated with other topics in the course, or in any other form. Only 25% of the

respondents agreed that “Family-school cooperation should play a more important role in their curriculum”.

Some essays demonstrate students’ opinion on their expectation about Educational Teacher Program: “(...) Such topics like cooperation with parents should be more strongly emphasized in optional courses and should be offered by the Institute of Teacher Training”; “I feel a bit nervous before starting teaching activity, and I suppose I could change my mind after getting some practical experience”, “I’d like to be more confident in *working with parents, my future students’ family and community*. The practical training could be useful, particularly direct and indirect interaction with parents. If possible, they should be comprehensive and prolonged.”

Assessment of the curriculum content of the teacher training programs showed that there were no specific courses on the topic of Teacher-School Cooperation in Educational Teacher Program in the Institute of Teacher Training of the Pedagogical University of Cracow. But elements of family-teacher cooperation occurred in a few elective courses. A close examination of the courses reveals that little attention is paid to communication. For example, in the course on Educational Conceptions and Practices, the general competencies concerned only teachers’ ability to communicate with parents in order to inform them about their child’s progress or the school program.

There are other important issues in the program of Basics of Psychology (conflict management and assisting families with special needs children). Preparing for family-school cooperation is also an important issue during in-field-training. Despite these efforts by the Teacher Training Institute of the Pedagogical University of Cracow, none of the respondents considers that preparation of teacher candidates for family-school cooperation is really good.

Conclusion

In this explorative study, preparation of students-future teachers for communicative interaction between the actors of educational process in school was examined within teaching specialization as an additional selective program for the students of different specializations of the Pedagogical University of Cracow (Poland), who wish to get a license for secondary school level teaching. The study indicated that preparation for parents-school cooperation is integrated in different courses of Teacher Training Program. Attention is mainly focused on theoretical knowledge connected with family-school cooperation with big emphasis on parents educational competences training (e.g. communication, psychological aspects of adolescent, influence of ICT and media on children development, some elements of health education, etc.). Unfortunately there is no attention to the models of parents-teachers interactions in the school or underlying power relationships or barriers as well as assessment on this topic. In the Polish University teacher training programs more attention is paid to theoretical preparing for cooperation with parents than to teaching practices for collaboration with families.

Students-future teachers considered family-school cooperation as an important professional topic, but quite difficult to establish. In their eases they often described

future communication with parents as frightening and hardly predictable. Finally, all respondents felt preparation for cooperation with students families like an inadequate. They called for dipper attention to receiving competences for parents-school interactions and more practical experience in this area. In the view of the respondents, teacher novices do not feel well prepared for family-school cooperation. Nevertheless, the universities are still reluctant whether to give family-school cooperation more importance in future curricula or to plan other changes in the curricula concerning preparing for family-school cooperation.

In this explorative study, there were only 150 candidates for getting a license for secondary school level; therefore, no generalizations can be made to all candidates at the Pedagogical University of Cracow (Poland), or to all practical teacher novices in Polish secondary schools. Nevertheless, the lack of attention to parents-school cooperation in the curricula in this study and the insufficient preparation for this topic as perceived by respondents are consistent with other studies (Epstein, Sanders 2006; Denessen et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2013) and seem to confirm that preparing students-future teachers for communicative interaction between the actors of educational process in school is a difficult, constant and extensive problem.

There is a necessity to conduct a comparative international research aimed at finding and implementing the best practices of Teacher Training Programs including various ways of developing student skills for building *partnership between school, home and community*.

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to explore the competences of students-future teachers to cooperate with their students' families and local community. The main objective was also focused on the teacher training in this area due to the importance of partnership in the contemporary school.

To achieve these goals, the surveys and document analysis were carried out. Students of different specializations of the Pedagogical University of Cracow (Poland) were examined. The preliminary findings have shown that the University's teacher training programs put emphasis on theoretical knowledge regarding family-school cooperation. However, the results also showed that students do not feel well prepared for practical activities in this area. The analysis of teacher education programs specified that the teacher's practice and communication skills in the field of cooperation with parents of students are under-emphasized. The article is an attempt to propose new ways of teacher training in the field of communication and social skills, as well as cooperation with students' parents and local community.

Keywords: pre-school teachers, teacher training, students' parents, contemporary school

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