Foreign Language Teacher Education: School Placements as a Source of Knowledge About Parents As Partners In The Educational Process

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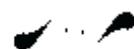
Abstract

As stated by Joyce L. Epstein (2011: 4) school and family partnerships framework is "a better approach" to the involvement of all subjects of the pedagogical process, i.e. pupils, parents and teachers than its two extreme options, i.e. "waiting for involvement or dictating it." The fact that school-family partnerships play a crucial role in children's wellbeing is well documented. Despite the unquestionable fact, though, there is a field of study centered around the dichotomy between the beliefs about the importance of building parent-teacher collaboration declared by teacher educators and novice teachers' unwillingness to collaborate with parents. In the paper the author refers to her previous study devoted to Preservice teachers' attitudes related to family involvement in light of their school placement experience (2017). In the small scale (pilot) study it was proved that direct contact with parents during school placements of Type 2 – Communication of Epstein's six types of parental involvement, enhances ex-trainee teachers' understanding of the importance of parental involvement in supervising learning activities at home (i.e. Type 4 of Epstein's six types of parental involvement). The current paper further elaborates on the topic and presents results of a study conducted on a larger group of preservice elementary teachers of English and Polish with an attempt to ascertain that above findings. It appears that direct contact with parents during school placements of Type 2 – Communication and Type 3 – Volunteering correlates with trainees' high opinions about four types of parental involvements, i.e. Type 2 – Communicating, Type 6 – Collaborating with the Community, Type 7 – Parents observing lessons, and Type 8 – Home visits by teachers.

Keywords: Preservice foreign language teachers, school placements, school-family partnership.
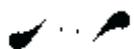
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Introduction

The aim of the paper is twofold. In the theoretical part it briefly reviews literature on parents as partners in the educational process. The point of departure is here Joyce L. Epstein's integrated theory of family-school relationships and a model of overlapping family and school spheres. The review of literature shows how the concept of parents as partners in the educational process evolves in light of recent studies. The practical part presents results of a study conducted on a group of language preservice teachers from a medium-sized university in the south-east of Poland. The objective of the study was to find out whether the subjects had any types of direct contact with parents during their teaching practice and, if yes, whether their field experience in the matter correlated with their opinions about the importance of eight types of family involvement[2]. It appears that direct contact with parents during school placements of Type 2 – *Communicating* or/and Type 3 – *Volunteering* correlates with trainees' high opinions about four types of parental involvements, i.e. Type 2 – Communicating, Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community*, Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*, and Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*. The (pilot) study (Bąk-Średnicka 2017) revealed that ex-trainee teachers' direct contact with parents during school placements only of Type 2 – *Communicating* correlated with their high opinion about Type 4 – *Learning at Home*. The findings are discussed in the paper in a wider context of recent research which can suggest that direct contact of Type 2 – *Communicating*, involving informing parents about school programs and a child's progress, can result in future teachers' unwillingness to view parents as partners but rather as 'distant supporters'. Therefore, in the paper we support a thesis that foreign language trainees can become more effective by gaining *direct* experience in *various* educational contexts and situations that can become crucial in dealing with challenges in the language classroom (Baum & Swick, 2008: 581, Siek-Piskozub and Jankowska, 2015: 219). The "preservice course work that focuses [entirely] on what occurs in the classroom leads student teachers to think of teaching as a task accomplished in isolation" (de Acosta, 1996: 12 qtd in Morris & Taylor, 1998: 222). A case in point here is direct contact with parents during school placements.

1. Theoretical background

The fact that family-school collaboration can enhance pupils' academic success and well-being is well-documented. However, there is a "dramatic gap" between the beliefs of the importance of building parent-teacher collaboration held by teacher educators and future teachers' unwillingness to collaborate with parents (Epstein, 1987/2011: xviii). Research on placement partnerships has shown that the chance of different types of direct contact with parents during field placements can challenge prospective teachers to reject their stereotypes of parents as 'distant supporters' (McBride 199; Graue & Brown 2003; Baum and McMurray-Schwarz 2004; Uludag (2008). The rationale behind this placement partnerships framework is also the fact that Polish education reform of 1999 prioritised building a wider and deeper range of family-school-community relationships (e.g. Miłkowska-Olejniczak 2002). Moreover, Polish education reform of 1999 integrated education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) with the education of other pupils in mainstream schools either in integration or mainstream classes[3]. As reported by some foreign language teachers (e.g. Bąk-Średnicka 2011), close collaboration with parents of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools is an absolute necessity. At the same time, as shown in recent literature, family centred activities, courses and projects are offered mainly for prospective early childhood education teachers and special education teachers rather than for foreign language primary teachers whose development in this area is neglected (Bingham & Abernathy 2007; Ellis 2012; Błaszczyk 2014; Nowosad and Pietrań 2015).

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[2] i.e. Type 1 - Parenting, Type 2 - Communicating, Type 3 - Volunteering, Type 4 - Learning at home, Type 5 - Decision making and Type 6 - Collaborating with the Community, Type 7 - Parents observing lessons, and Type 8 – Home visits by teachers.

[3] SEN pupils account for ca. 3% of all pupils in mainstream primary schools (Eurydice 2014: 78).

2. School placements at departments of teaching modern languages at Polish universities: a closer look

Foreign language teachers in Poland are educated in accordance with regulations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Journal of Laws of 2012 No. 131) and the Ministry of National Education (Journal of Laws of 2017 No. 1575). In line with this, in the Polish academic context there is a general criticism of "the disregard for the specifics of the profession of the FL teacher in curriculum standards and administrative regulations" (Zawadzka-Bartnik, 2014: 7; 2015: 141). University departments of modern languages offer prospective primary teachers academic qualifications to teach a foreign language starting from grade 4 onwards. Those candidates who want to teach a foreign language in pre-primary education and in grades 1-3 have to graduate from those departments of early childhood education at Institutes of Pedagogy which offer such courses. The general framework of teacher education assumes three modules with minimal number of hours of subject courses (Module 1), pedagogical courses (Module 2) and didactic courses (Module 3). Modules 2 and 3 offer at least 150 hours of practicum, i.e. 30 hours of pedagogical practicum and 120 hours of didactic practicum. Polish higher schools are given considerable autonomy as regards teacher training programs in general and programs of teaching practice in particular. Consequently, programs of teacher training at departments of teaching foreign languages are tailored individually by each department to meet the abovementioned ministerial requirements (Journal of Laws of 2012) as well as specific teaching contexts.

3. Parents as partners in the educational process: literature review

Epstein, (1987/2011) forwarded an integrated theory of family-school relationships and introduced a model of overlapping family and school spheres. The foundations for the theory are three possible approaches to family school relations which assume either separate, shared or sequential responsibilities of families and schools as well as two theoretical perspectives grounded in sociology and social psychology (Epstein 1987/2011: 27). It appears that family-school connections are dependent upon teachers' and parents' philosophies and practices which they have adopted as a result of complex relations within communities both on the level of individuals (*symbolic interactionism*) as well as reference groups that they represent (*reference group theory*) (Epstein 1987/2011: 27). In order to account for the nature of all possible family-school relations, Epstein developed a model of overlapping family and school spheres. It reveals that true partnership is possible when there is a maximum family-school overlap by means of "frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communication between parents and teachers in a comprehensive program of many important types of parent involvement" (Epstein, 1986/2011: 150). Epstein (2006/2011: 46-47) states that there are six important types of involvement: Type 1 – *Parenting* supporting parents to create home environments enhancing a child's development; Type 2 – *Communicating* informing parents about school programs and a child's progress; Type 3 – *Volunteering* encouraging parents to help in school events; Type 4 – *Learning at Home* instructing parents how to help a child with homework and develop their talents; Type 5 – *Decision Making* encouraging parents to participate in school committee, and Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community* involving local community in school life for the benefit of the community, children and school. Interestingly enough, Epstein ascertains that despite the fact that the maximum overlap of family and school spheres is typical of (very) early education, in some cases it continues throughout the whole education influencing positively pupils "attitudes and achievements" (Epstein, 1987/2011: 33, 37, 39).

Recent research confirms that quality relationships depend on various factors within the abovementioned reference groups of teachers and parents. In other words, "Epstein's tenets of communication, advocacy, volunteerism, homework, parenting, and collaboration are not portrayed as neutral constructs but contain ideologies of dominant power relations paralleling that of the larger society" (Brantlinger, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Doucet, 2008; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Kroeger, 2005 qtd in Kroeger & Lash 2011: 269-270). For example, in "schools with diverse populations" the dominating cultural capital of school community makes parents who act as volunteers and advocates within Type 3 and Type 5 actually advantage the dominating groups of "higher-income individuals" over the groups of minorities (Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 270).

In line with this, Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain (2016) conducted a research on a group of 959 Jewish and Arab elementary and secondary teachers with a view to finding out to what extent teachers' feminine, social and cultural capital influenced their relationships with parents regarding three parental roles, i.e. parents as partners, parents as a threat and parents as disengaged in school (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2016: 48). Again, it appears that teachers' relations with parents are correlated with their capital. Particularly, when teachers dominate over parents' socio-cultural background, as in the case of Arab teachers, they avoid relations with parents as "equal partners" (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2016: 50). As a result of the above, there are fewer interactions with parents and the relations are based on "the social relations developed between teachers at school" (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2016: 51). Contrary, Jewish teachers whose social position is not higher when compared with the position of parents, have relationships with parents based on collaboration and threat (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2016: 50).

Kroeger & Lash (2011) put forward a model of family involvement which goes "beyond a model of parent involvement or a family needs-based approach toward an inquiry-driven method to support teachers working with families of young children" (Kroeger & Lash 2011: 271). The study was conducted on a group of 11 preservice teachers who participated in a 8-week parent-child-teacher inquiry based assignment as well as field placements. The parent-child-teacher study project was based on "working with parents in the form of an individually developed interview" (Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 272). Preservice teachers examined critically the (biased) language they used in the interviews with parents from all walks of life (Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 272). Their written and spoken "reflective excerpts" about their "initial thinking about families" were systematically analyzed with a view to singling out "transformational examples at each stage of the assignment to highlight situations and behaviors which demonstrate preservice teacher thinking" (Stremmel, 2002; Wells, 2002 in Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 271). The authors conclude that parent-child-teacher study project goes beyond "simply reading a text book and understanding family life" (Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 275). As a result of participating in the project preservice teachers "seemed more willing to evaluate their prior preconceptions about families. They seemed to see that not just parental presence in schools but a variety of individual styles of parenting and family engagement can meet learning and school goals" (Kroeger & Lash, 2011: 275).

Peck, Maude and Brotherson (2015), in turn, conducted a qualitative study on the role and place of empathy among those elements which are most important for partnership. In particular, the academics aimed to answer the following question: "How do teachers express empathy in their relationships with young children and families?" (2015: 170). The subject were 18 (pre) school teachers who were interviewed by means of an initial interview; they were asked questions like: ''What does a successful partnership with parents look like to you?''; and ''What specifically do you do that helps to foster partnerships with parents?'' (2015: 171). Then five teachers "who were identified through initial analysis as primarily empathic toward children and families" (Peck, Maude and Brotherson 2015: 173) were chosen and further interviewed by means of follow-up interviews. It appears that "teachers who made empathic statements reported more successful partnerships with parents" (Peck, Maude and Brotherson 2015: 176). Generally, the empathic teachers' approach to partnership was based on acceptance of diverse families and their cultural practices (Peck, Maude and Brotherson 2015: 175). There was a wide range of direct and indirect contacts with families established by the emphatic teachers via emails, newsletters, phone calls, handwritten notes, and face-to-face meetings. As stated in the paper, "one of the most powerful methods of meaningful communication that informed teachers' empathy was going on a home visit" (Peck, Maude and Brotherson 2015: 176). It is concluded that teacher educators should provide preservice teachers with "support regarding empathy" by mans of "training on empathy" (Peck, Maude and Brotherson 2015: 177).

The abovementioned examples of recent research point to two dominant factors behind family-school partnership, i.e. a variety of parents-teachers contact and emphatic personality on the part of teachers as well as their conscious effort to challenge stereotypes and accept ethnic, socio-cultural and economic diversities within families.

4. Preservice language teachers' attitudes related to family involvement – a report from the study

The aim of the study

The aim of the study was:

(1) to find out preservice language teachers' opinions about the importance of eight types of parental involvement (Epstein 1987/2011; Śliwerski 2001),

(2) to find out whether the preservice language teachers had any *direct* contact with parents during their teaching practice,

(3) to find out what types of *direct* contact with parents the preservice language teachers had during their teaching practice,

(4) to find out whether the field experience as regards *direct* contact with parents correlates with the preservice language teachers' opinions about the importance of the eight types of family involvement.

The point of departure for the research is a pilot study (Bąk-Średnicka 2017) where it was revealed that there is a correlation between ex-trainees' *direct* contact with parents during school placements of Type 2 – *Communicating* of Epstein's six types of parental involvement and their high opinion about the importance of parental involvement in supervising learning activities at home, i.e. Type 4 – *Learning at home*.

Research questions

(1) what are preservice language teachers' opinions about the most and the least important types of family-school involvement?

(2) are there any statistically relevant associations between the preservice language teachers' opinions about the most important type of parent-teacher partnership and their direct contacts with parents during practicum?

The sample

The study took a sample of 61 preservice language teachers: 40 preservice teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) and 11 preservice teachers of Polish from a medium-sized university in the south-east of Poland. The respondents completed their teaching practice between autumn 2017 and spring 2018. The subjects were 47 women and 14 men aged 21-37. The mean age was 23.8.

Procedures

Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire which consisted of two parts. Part one referred to subjects' opinions and part two referred to their field experiences. Part one was a slightly modified version of Epstein's Framework of six types of family involvement (Epstein 2011) and two additional types, i.e. Type 7 – Parents observing lessons and Type 8 – Home visits by teachers (Śliwerski 2001). Part two consisted of two open-ended questions which referred to their field experiences as regards direct contacts with parents. The questionnaires were distributed personally by university practicum supervisors as soon as the subjects had completed their practicum.

Measures

Part one of the questionnaire comprised eight types of school-family collaboration: Type 1 – *Parenting* ("helping all families understand child and adolescent development and establishing home environments that support children as students"), Type 2 – *Communicating* ("designing and concluding effective forms of two-way communication about school programs and children's progress"), Type 3 – *Volunteering* ("recruiting and organizing help and support at school, home, or in other locations to support the school and student's activities"), Type 4 – *Learning at Home* ("providing information and ideas for families about how to help students with homework, and curriculum-related activities and decisions"), Type 5 – Decision Making ("having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and obtaining input from all

parents on school decisions"), Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community* ("identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families, and organising activities to benefit the community and increase students' learning opportunities") (Epstein, 1987/2011: 46); Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*, and Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers* (Śliwerski 2001: 174). Subjects expressed their opinions about the importance of the eight types of collaboration using the five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from: not important at all, of little importance, undecided, important, very important.

In part two of the questionnaire the subjects were asked to respond to two open-ended questions:

(1) did you have any direct contact with parents during your pedagogic and didactic practice?

(2) if you had direct contact with parents during your pedagogic and didactic practice, briefly describe what kind of contact you had.

Results

Part 1: which types of family-school collaboration are important?

Type 1 – *Parenting*: 25 (41.0%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 17 (27.9%) find it very important; in total 42 (**68.8**%) respondents are of the opinion that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 2 – *Communicating*: 16 (26.3%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 43 (70.5%) find it very important; in total 59 (**96.7**%) respondents are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 3 – *Volunteering*: 27 (44.2%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 14 (23.0%) find it very important; in total 41 (**67.2**%) respondents are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 4 – *Learning at Home*: 21 (34.4%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 37 (60.7%) find it very important; in total 58 (**95.0**%) respondents are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 5 – *Decision Making*: 35 (57.4%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 8 (13.1%) find it very important; in total 43 (**70.4**%) respondents are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community*: 29 (47.5%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 2 (3.3%) find it very important; in total 31 (**50.8**%) respondents are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*: 5 (8.1%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important and 2 (3.3%) find it very important; in total 7 (**11.4**%) are of the opinion that that this type of relationship is (very) important.

Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*: 6 (**9.8**%) respondents find this type of family-school collaboration important.

The above analysis of the responses suggests that majority of subjects were of the opinion that Types 1-6 of parent involvement are (very) important. They were of the highest opinion about Type 2 – *Communicating* and Type 4 – *Learning at Home*. They had the lowest opinion about Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*, and Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*. The above findings correspond with the findings in the pilot study (Bąk-Średnicka 2017).

Part 2: did you have direct contact with parents during your pedagogic and didactic practice? If yes, briefly describe what kind of contact you had.

Only 14 (22.9%) subjects admitted they had direct contact with parents during their practicum of Type 2 – *Communicating* (16.3%) and/or Type 3 – *Volunteering* (9.8%)[4]. It was experienced mostly by EFL preservice teachers (13 subjects). Only one preservice Polish teacher experienced a direct contact with parents of Type 2 – *Communicating*. One subject described contact with a parent of a pupil with SEN in an integration class. Four subjects participated in face-to-face contact with parents which was caused by pupils' problems at school. Three subjects took part in parent-teacher conferences whereas six subjects described contact with parents during class trips and school events. Some subjects who did not report any direct contact with parents commented on the fact as follows:

(1) *Unfortunately, I have not had contact of this type yet.*

(2) *No, I just observed parent-teacher conference from a distance.*

(3) *During my practicum I observed that parents communicate with teachers mainly when their child has problems at school caused by some disorders such as, e.g. autism or dyslexia. In such cases teachers inform parents about their child's behaviour in the classroom, academic progress or problems such as, e.g. not doing homework. Parents, in turn, tell teachers about their problems with parenting. Due to the exchange of such pieces of information, both parents and teachers improve their ways of supporting the child.*

Descriptive statistics

As mentioned a group of 14 subjects had direct contact with parents during their teaching practice whereas a group of 47 subjects did not have such contact. Student *t*–test was used to test whether the two group means are different. In the cases of a violation of the assumption of variance homogeneity, the Cochran–Cox adjustment was carried out. The effect size was calculated by Cohen's *d*.

The analyses revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between the group of subjects who had direct contact with parents during their teaching practice of Type 2– *Communicating* and/or Type 3 – *Volunteering* and the group of subjects who did not have such contact. The statistically significant difference refers to their higher opinions as regards the importance of following types of parental involvement (see Table 1 for details):

Type 2 – *Communicating*: $t_{c-c\,(52.87)}$ = -2.98; p = 0.004   M = 4.93; SD = 0.27

Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community*: $t_{c-c\,(40.08)}$ = -3.63; p = 0.001 M = 3.86; SD = 0.53

Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*: $t_{(59)}$ = -2.09 ; p = 0.041   M = 2.71; SD = 0.83

Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*: $t_{(59)}$ = -3.55; p = 0.001   M = 2.86; SD = 0.86

| | Direct contact with parents during teaching practice | | | | | | |
| | No (N = 47) | | Yes (N = 14) | | | | |
Types of parental involvement	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's *d*
Type 1 – *Parenting*	3.77	1.22	3.79	0.70	-0.06	0.954	-
Type 2 – *Communicating*	**4.57**	**0.65**	**4.93**	**0.27**	**-2.98**	**0.004**	**0.72**
Type 3 – *Volunteering*	3.64	1.05	4.00	1.04	-1.13	0.262	-
Type 4 – *Learning at Home*	4.53	0.62	4.64	0.50	-0.61	0.543	-
Type 5 – *Decision Making*	3.64	0.85	3.93	1.14	-1.04	0.304	-
Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community*	**3.13**	**0.97**	**3.86**	**0.53**	**-3.63**	**0.001**	**0.93**
Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*	**2.06**	**1.07**	**2.71**	**0.83**	**-2.09**	**0.041**	**0.68**
Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*	**1.87**	**0.92**	**2.86**	**0.86**	**-3.55**	**0.001**	**1.11**

Table 1. The mean estimation of the importance of the eight types of parental involvement in the group of subjects who had direct contact with parents during their teaching practice and in the group of subjects who did not have this opportunity.

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[4] In the pilot study "nine subjects (32.1%) had direct contact with parents which was Type 2 – Communicating" (Bąk-Średnicka 2017: 42).

5. Discussion

As shown in the pilot study, those EFL trainees who experienced direct contact with parents of Type 2 – *Communicating*, i.e., mainly limited to face-to-face parent-teacher conferences, strongly agree that parents should have an important role to play by means of Type 4 – *Learning at Home*, i.e., supporting their children at home (Bąk-Średnicka 2017: 17). As shown in research, however, this "most educationally significant" parental involvement of Type 4 is most effective when nurtured by other types of close parent-teacher partnerships (Chavkin & Williams, 1993 qtd. in Uludag 2006: 18). In light of the fact it can be stated that when preservice teachers' field experiences are of direct contact of Type 2 – *Communicating*, they are of the opinion that parents should be 'distant supporters' involved with their children's education at home rather than engaged in school activities. In the current study preservice language teachers experienced direct contact of Type 2 – *Communicating* and of Type 3 – *Volunteering*. Almost half (42.8%) of the subjects experienced direct contact with parents by means of participating in school events and school trips. This type of experience correlates with their high opinion about four types of parent-teachers collaboration such as Type 2 – *Communicating*, Type 6 – *Collaborating with the Community*, Type 7 – *Parents observing lessons*, and Type 8 – *Home visits by teachers*. The results can indicate that a more various direct contact of preservice teachers with parents during school placements can result in a better understanding of the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and/or empathy[5]. Further study should focus on how direct contact during school placements that goes beyond Type 2 and Type 3 correlates with future language teachers' opinions about the importance of the eight types of parental involvement.

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[5] cf. Peck, Maude and Brotherson claim that "one of the most powerful methods of meaningful communication that informed teachers' empathy was going on a home visit" (2015: 176).

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