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# Teacher - Parent Partnerships: Preservice Teacher Competences and Attitudes during Teacher Training in the Netherlands.

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Teachers are expected to build strong relationships with their students' parents, but little is known about the way they develop their perspectives on parent involvement and their competences in relating to parents. To gain insight in these developments, a survey study was conducted about the content of the curricula of three teacher training institutes in the Netherlands and the impact of teacher training on preservice teachers' attitudes and competences. Surveys were administered to a total of 545 preservice teachers from all grades of their training. Overall, it seemed that levels of competence of Dutch student teachers were quite low, despite the fact that teacher training programmes provided many curricular components on this issue. Some positive though small effects of teacher training programmes have been observed. In general, however, students don't feel well prepared to communicate with parents when starting their teaching career. Although some differences between teacher training institutes exist, the effectiveness of teacher training programmes did not appear to differ across institutes. Student teachers' attitudes towards parents were nevertheless very positive. These attitudes, however, were not related to their teacher training experiences, but seemed to be founded in their personal biography.

*Keywords:* teacher-parent partnership, preservice teacher, teachers' competence, training programme

The value of strong teacher - parent partnerships has been acknowledged widely. Strong teacher - parent partnerships are suggested to contribute to children's academic performance as well as their well-being at school. Also these partnerships contribute to mutual understanding and support of parents and teachers (see Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005).

Many authors have pointed at the key role teachers play with respect to the quality of teacher - parent partnerships (Epstein, 2003; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fish, & Hernandez, 2003). Positive attitudes towards parents as well as the presence of well developed communicative skills are said to be

crucial for teachers to create strong links with parents and to enable parental involvement at school to positively contribute to the effects at many levels (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Especially teachers' level of responsiveness to family cultures of children from economically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds is suggested to contribute to strong teacher - parent partnerships, and, as a result, to positive student learning outcomes and school well-being (Espinosa, 2005; Tett, 2004). Responsive teachers need to know, for example, about children's backgrounds, how to establish relations with diverse families, and how to integrate cultural diversity in their daily practice (Espinosa, 2005; Trumbull et al., 2003).

In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, national standards have been formulated for teachers' competences in communicating with parents. Among other requirements, teachers are expected to "be familiar with their pupils'

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background cultures and to take these background cultures into account in their daily teaching practice" (SBL, 2004).

Moreover, teachers are expected to be able to communicate with all parents with diverse social and cultural backgrounds about children's performance and well-being as well as to respond adequately to all parents' questions.

In educational practice, it appears that national standards have not yet been met at a large scale.

Research on teacher competences regarding teacher – parent partnerships has revealed large differences between teachers with respect to their attitude towards parents and their communication skills as part of their professional competences with respect to teacher – parent partnerships (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, Graue, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). Causes for differences in levels of competences with respect to teacher – parent partnerships among teachers can be deduced from precursors of teachers' professional identity that have been identified by studies on teachers' professional development (e.g., Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Three precursors that have been identified as relevant for teachers' professional identity formation are: 1) teachers' personal biography, 2) teaching experiences, and 3) teacher training.

The impact of teachers' biography on their attitudes towards parents has been illustrated by Graue (2005) and Graue and Brown (2003), who concluded from analyses of student responses on a survey on home-school relations that prospective teachers approach the first grade of their professional programme with clear ideas about home school relations, recalling their own biography. Memories of their own parents' involvement attitudes and practices seem to shape their notions of preferable interaction processes between parents and schools.

With regard to teachers' experiences, it has been shown that good as well as bad practices impact teachers' attitudes towards parents.

Successful experiences with collaboration between parents and teachers may increase teachers' willingness to invest in good teacher – parent communications, whereas frustrating experiences with uninvolved parents may reduce their willingness to do so (e.g., Denessen, Bakker, & Gierveld, 2007). Also teacher training may contribute to positive teacher attitude as well as teacher competences with respect to teacher – parent partnerships. Although many initiatives have been developed by teacher training

institutes, teachers do not seem well-prepared in this respect. Quite recently, Epstein and Sanders (2006) concluded from a survey among leaders of a representative sample of 161 schools, colleges, and departments of education in the US that only 7.2% of the respondents strongly agreed that teachers who graduated from their programmes were sufficiently prepared to work and communicate with families.

With this study, we focused on preservice teacher training on teacher – parent partnerships of a sample of three primary teacher training institutes in the Netherlands. Two related goals were formulated for this study. A first goal was to identify the relations of teacher training (i.e. curriculum contents and assignments related to practical teaching activities of teacher training programmes concerning teacher – parent partnerships), on the one hand, with the development of attitudes and competences of preservice teachers in successive grades of their training on the other. A second goal was to assess the impact of biography on teachers' attitudes and competences throughout their teacher training.

The research question that we tried to answer was *"to what extent do students' biography and their teacher training affect their competences concerning teacher – parent partnerships and their attitudes towards parents?"* With this study we aim to contribute to the effectiveness of teacher preparation for successful teacher – parent partnerships.

## Method

### *Participants*

Three randomly selected Dutch primary teacher training institutes agreed to participate in this study. From each institute, a programme coordinator has been interviewed and in total 545 preservice teachers of four successive grades (15% male and 85% female; mean age: 21.1 SD 1.94) took part in a survey-study.

### *Measures*

#### Curriculum content

To assess the curriculum content of the teacher training programmes, relevant course documents and instructions for student assignments have been collected from the programme coordinators of each institute. Additionally, the programme coordinators were interviewed to collect additional background information about the content and aims of the training programme.

### Competences, attitudes, and student biography

For the measurement of preservice teachers' competences, their attitudes, and their biography (i.e. involvement of their own parents), a survey study has been designed.

*Competence* statements were derived from the Dutch national standards in this respect. The survey contained statements to collect self reports of competences concerning parent teacher relationships. Examples of statements referring to preservice teacher competences were "I know how to discuss students' school achievement with parents", "I am a good listener if parents tell about their problems", and "I know how to ask parents some advice how to get along with their child". These statements were to be rated on a four-point Likert scale. The scores of the preservice teachers on the 18 selected statements showed a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .90).

For the assessment of students' attitudes toward parents' involvement a list of 12 items was administered, to be rated on a four point Likert scale. Examples of attitude statements were "I think it is important to discuss children's development with parents", "I think it's important for the child that parents' and teacher's ideas about rearing converge", and "I think it's important to make good use of parents' advises to approach the child in the classroom". The scores of the preservice teachers on the 12 selected statements yielded a relatively high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .72).

The third part of the survey contained 12 statements about the level of involvement that students' parents showed in the past. These statements were derived from a survey that has been developed by Bakker, Denessen, and Brus-Laeven (2005). Students were asked to rate the levels of involvement behaviours on a four point Likert scale (e.g., "my parents used to have contact with my teachers on a regular basis", "my parents always read the information leaflets or newsletters from the school", and "my parents used to ask me almost daily about how things went at school", Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .83).

### *Analyses*

To answer the research question we have related the curriculum content of the teacher training institutes and the level of involvement of the parents of the students to the students' levels of competences and attitudes. Analyses of variance were applied to test differences among students from different grades and different teacher training institutes. Regression analyses were applied to test the relative impact of teacher training and students' biography on their levels of competence and their attitudes towards parents. The set level of significance was .05.

## **Results**

### *Curriculum content*

To gain insight in the content of the curriculum on parent involvement, course descriptions were screened and programme coordinators were interviewed. It appeared that all three institutes provided some courses on teacher-parent communication. With respect to the curriculum content, a distinction is made between activities at the teacher training institute (i.e. courses), and activities during field practice. Curriculum contents of the successive grades of the institutes are summarized in Table 1.

Apart from attention to teacher-parent partnerships at the training institute (i), students were given parent-involvement related tasks to perform at their practice school (p). Because the administration of student surveys took place during the school year, a distinction within grades is made with respect to courses before and after the survey administration. This distinction is made because student ratings of their competence and attitudes can then be linked to the training they have received at the moment of data collection.

As can be seen from Table 1, the three teacher training institutes paid a lot of attention to parent-teacher communication issues. A lot of field practice activities concerned parent teacher conferences. Preservice teachers from all institutes were asked to attend conferences and, when progressed to the fourth grade of the teacher training programme, to conduct conferences themselves. At TTI3 we observed more courses at the training institute than at the other institutes. TTI1 and TTI2 put a strong emphasis on practical experiences with parent teacher interactions.

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Table 1.

Description of curriculum contents at the training institute (i) or during field practice (p) on parent involvement of three teacher training institutes (TTI's)

		TTI1	TTI2	TTI3
Grade1	before survey	invitation of parents to training institute (i), orientation on parent participation (p)	-	course: communicating with parents
	after survey	attend a parent teacher conference (p)	research on differences between school culture and family culture (p)	attend a parent teacher conference (p)
Grade2	before survey	attend a parent teacher conference (p)	attend a parent teacher conference (p)	course on communication skills (i) analyses of school's vision on parents (p) attend a parent teacher conference (p)
	after survey	description of parent participation practices (p)	course on parent teacher contacts (i) attend a parent teacher conference (p)	attend three parent teacher conferences and writing a reflection on those (p) role-playing practice of communication with parents (i)
Grade3	before survey	discussing special education needs with parents (p)	course on intercultural differences (i) training on parent teacher conference (i) conduct a parent teacher conference, (p)	course on communication, role-playing practice of communication with parent (i) attend parent teacher conferences (p)
	after survey	attend parent teacher conferences (p) discuss teaching behaviour with parents (p)	attend parent teacher conferences (p) involve parents with the development of teaching materials (p)	attend parent teacher conferences (p)
Grade4	before survey	practice parent teacher conferences (i) conduct parent teacher conferences (p)	conduct parent teacher conferences (p)	formulate personal goals related to contacts with parents (i) conduct parent teacher conferences (p)
	after survey	-	-	course: describe personal vision on the perfect school, include vision on parents (i)

*Preservice teacher competences and attitudes*

The preservice teachers were asked to rate their competences related to parent teacher communication as well as their attitudes towards parents. Their self reported levels of competence and their attitudes are summarised in Table 2.

Overall, it seemed that student perceptions of their levels of competence were quite low. Student attitudes towards parents, however, were quite positive. Levels of competence of students from

TTI1 seemed higher than those of the other two teacher training institutes. At TTI1 and TTI2 gains in competences seemed to be located between grades 2 and 3, whereas at TTI3 relatively high levels of competence were perceived by students from grade 4. With regard to student attitudes, differences between grades seemed very small. It showed that perceived levels of competence were not related to student attitudes ( $r = -.02, p > .05$ ).

*Table 2.*

Descriptive statistics of levels of perceived competences and attitudes towards parents of students from four grades from three teacher training institutes (TTI's) (range 1-4).

	TTI1			TTI2			TTI3			Total		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
<i>Competences</i>												
Grade 1	2.00	.56	60	1.74	.65	23	1.97	.59	52	1.94	.59	135
Grade 2	2.16	.55	99	1.98	.39	18	1.97	.54	62	2.07	.54	179
Grade 3	2.38	.51	22	2.47	.45	13	2.05	.46	48	2.20	.50	83
Grade 4	2.50	.53	42	2.33	.61	16	2.37	.38	54	2.42	.48	112
Total	2.20	.57	223	2.07	.61	70	2.09	.52	216	2.14	.56	509
<i>Attitudes</i>												
Grade 1	3.10	.30	64	3.17	.27	24	3.14	.26	53	3.13	.28	141
Grade 2	3.12	.23	97	3.09	.25	18	3.19	.27	65	3.14	.24	180
Grade 3	3.13	.25	23	3.11	.36	14	3.17	.24	49	3.15	.26	86
Grade 4	3.07	.26	42	3.15	.29	16	3.17	.23	55	3.13	.25	113
Total	3.10	.26	226	3.13	.29	72	3.17	.24	222	3.14	.26	520

*Effects of teacher training and student biography on competences and attitudes*

To test the effects of teacher training and student biography on their perceived levels of competence and their attitudes towards parents, analyses of variance were applied. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 3. These analyses revealed that, with respect to student competences, differences between teacher training institutes as well as between grades were statistically significant, indicating gains in

competence during teacher training. Differences in gains across grades between teacher training institutes were nonsignificant (i.e. the interaction between teacher training institute and grade), which suggest that these institutes did not differ with respect to the effectiveness of their programme. Also, student perceptions of their levels of competence were not related to their parents' levels of involvement.

*Table 3.*

Analyses of variance of the effects of teacher training and student biography (i.e. involvement of students' parents) on levels of perceived competences and attitudes towards parents of students from four grades from three teacher training institutes.

	Competences <sup>1</sup>			Attitudes <sup>2</sup>	
	df	Mean square	F	Mean square	F
Teacher training institute	2	1.45	5.20*	.32	5.37*
Grade	3	4.77	17.15*	.01	.13
Teacher training institute * Grade	6	.50	1.79	.05	.82
Parents' involvement	1	.10	.36	2.90	47.97*

note: <sup>1</sup> df error = 493,  $R^2 = .13$ ; <sup>2</sup> df error = 504,  $R^2 = .11$ \*  $p < .05$

Analyses of differences in attitudes showed a different picture. Levels of involvement of the parents of the students showed a relatively strong effect on student attitudes ( $\beta = .28$ ), indicating that parents' involvement positively affects student attitudes. Also differences between teacher training institutes were significant. As can be seen from Table 2, students from TTI1 had less positive attitudes towards parents than the students from both other teacher training institutes. Effects of teacher training, however, were absent. Effects of grade on student attitudes were nonsignificant.

### Discussion

This study focused on effects of teacher training on students' competences concerning teacher – parent partnerships and their attitudes towards parents. We have studied student perceptions of their levels of competences as well as their attitudes towards parents at three teacher training institutes in the Netherlands. Overall, it seemed that levels of competence of Dutch student teachers are quite low, although some positive effects of teacher training programmes have been assessed. In general, students don't feel well prepared to communicate with parents when starting their teaching career. The levels of competence of students in the final grade of their teacher training programme still lies at the lower end of the four-point rating scale, and, although some differences between teacher training institutes exist, the effectiveness of teacher training programmes did not appear to differ across institutes. Differences between institutes, therefore, should be attributed to differences between student populations that already existed when students entered their teacher training. Student competences at the start of their teacher training, however, did not relate to their parents' levels of involvement.

With respect to student teachers' attitudes, their parents' levels of involvement seemed to be strongly predictive. This result is in line with previous studies of Graue (2005), and Graue and Brown (2003). Students whose parents showed high levels of involvement in the past reported positive attitudes towards parents. These positive attitudes, though, are not enhanced by teacher training, nor are they linked to the level of competence regarding parent-teacher commu-

nications. In contrast to student teachers' levels of competence, their attitudes towards parents were strongly related to their biography.

The results of our study may be conceived as disappointing in the light of the efforts teacher training institutes put into the preparation of student teachers. An inventory of programme elements related to parent-teacher partnership showed that all teacher training institutes paid attention to this topic in all grades of their programme. The effectiveness of teacher training programmes, however, seems limited. The observation of Epstein and Sanders (2006), that representatives of schools, colleges and departments of education rated the level of teacher preparation in this respect as low, may not only be explained by a lack of attention in teacher training, but also by the manner in which this topic is being addressed in teacher training programmes. Teacher training courses related to parent teacher partnerships seem to focus primarily on instrumental communicative practices. Many courses aim at the development of students' communication skills. Students might fail to acknowledge a direct relation between the communication with parents and the rationale behind strong parent-teacher partnerships. The value of positive attitudes and the relevance of good parent-teacher communication in the light of students' cognitive development and their well-being at school and at home, do not seem to be connected to instrumental communication practices. Therefore, we suggest that teacher training institutes should combine in their programmes communication practice as well as theoretical and empirical knowledge about the value and relevance of strong parent-teacher partnerships.

Nevertheless, teachers may contend with several psychological and cultural barriers to invite parents to educational involvement. In many cases, a lack of insight in parents' social and cultural background may be held accountable for the low levels of perceived competence (e.g. Denessen et al., 2007). To help teachers to connect with parents from various social and cultural backgrounds, teacher- parent communication practice should actively be linked to broader conceptions of diversity in education. This means that

teacher-parent communication should not be presented as a separate and isolated subject in teacher training, but that it should be embedded in general conceptions about teaching and learning throughout teacher training programmes. This message also could be delivered to national governments, who nowadays tend to present national professional standards in lists of specific competences (e.g., SBL, 2004).

This means of presentation of standards may well result in a decrease of the awareness that teacher competences are complex and integrated sets of beliefs, behaviours and attitudes. In the end, this may lead to less concern for theoretical reflection on the connectedness of distinct competences from a broader perspective.

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