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Finnish teacher-students' views on home-school cooperation

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This study focused on the views on home-school cooperation of teacher-students who are in the process of becoming professionals. The data were gathered from five focus-group interviews of 19 Finnish teacher-students. The data were analysed thematically. Better learning results were not the general aim of cooperation; instead, the aim was the child's well-being. All parties benefited when cooperation functioned well. Yet, factors related to parents and teachers' lack of time hinder cooperation. The views of home-school cooperation were a combination of the participants' childhood memories, stories they had heard from their friends and colleagues and, less saliently, ideas originating from teacher education.

Keywords: home-school cooperation, teacher education, teacher students, teachers' beliefs

Introduction

Previous research has shown that home-school cooperation is mostly beneficial for children's learning, development, and social functioning, as well as in addressing problem behaviours (e.g., El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Wilder, 2014). Although the research acknowledges the importance of cooperation, recent studies have noted that preparation for home-school cooperation in teacher education is insufficient in many countries, mostly due to time and resource issues (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde, & Mutton, 2018).

Research is often challenged by the fact that, despite the generally intuitive understanding of the addressed phenomenon, researchers define 'family-school partnership', 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement', or 'home-school cooperation' in several ways, thus making a summary of their conclusions challenging (e.g., Wilder, 2014). Likewise, 'the operational use of parental involvement has not been clear and consistent', as noted by Fan and Chen (2001, p. 3). In this study, the term 'home-school cooperation' is used because it is a direct translation of the Finnish term, and the focus is on school-related activities.

Although researchers have noted the benefits of cooperation, there are challenges to its fulfilment

(e.g., Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Previous research points out that teachers need certain competences to be effective in cooperation, such as *relational competences*, which are related to their attitudes towards parents, *communication competences*, such as teachers' ability to listen to parents, and *context competences*, which refer to the fact that cooperation concerns addressing various topics and contents, such as bullying (Westergård, 2013). In addition, teachers can experience parental involvement, especially by well-educated and resourceful parents, as a threat to their position and professional authority (e.g., Baeck, 2010). Yet, teachers are influential actors in parental involvement, as they have the power and position to either enhance or discourage it (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Factors identified as hindering cooperation include different beliefs and expectations of what is included in parental involvement or cooperation (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Teachers' beliefs can play an important role in either enhancing or discouraging parental involvement (e.g. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002).

Like parents, teachers endorse various kinds of beliefs concerning home-school cooperation originating partly from their training, contact with their colleagues, and their cultural beliefs systems (e.g., Huijbregts et al., 2008). Research on teachers' beliefs has a long tradition characterised by changing perspectives and few reliable findings. One of the few is the realisation that beliefs are difficult to change because they are related to emotions and memories and thus not rational.

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Nevertheless, their influence on thinking and practice is strong (Ashton, 2014). Current research on teacher beliefs suggests, for example, that when planning instruction and choosing between several available choices, teachers use both professional knowledge and their individual beliefs about teaching and learning (Lui & Bonner, 2016).

In Finland, teachers have considerable independence in their work, and in general, parents trust that they do their work well (Sormunen, Kirilina, Goranskaya, & Tossavainen, 2018; Tirri, 2014). Especially in the past, parents often thought of the school and home as separate, and they were not expected to be involved in the activities at school (Sormunen et al., 2018). Recently, with the rise of parents' educational levels and the revised National Core Curriculum of Basic Education, the role of parents in their children's schooling has become more emphasised (FNBE, 2014). Teacher education in Finland is outlined in the Finnish Government's Decree on University Degrees (794/2004). How education is organised in practise differs in the six Finnish-speaking teacher education programmes (Alanko, 2018). For example, they can have curricula of their own (Malinen, Väisänen, & Savolainen, 2012). In a survey on preparing teacher-students for home-school cooperation, the data collected from teacher-education programme organisers showed the importance of preparing teachers for home-school cooperation (Alanko, 2018). However, the respondents thought that their graduates had learned the basics of facilitating home-school cooperation and that it was a topic that would be learned in practical work or during the in-school practicum. (Alanko, 2018).

Aim

Previous research on teacher education has noted that teacher-students are poorly prepared for cooperating with parents (e.g., D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Thompson, Willemse, Mutton, Burn, & De Bruïne, 2018). Furthermore, the need for a study on teacher-students' beliefs regarding home-school cooperation has been stated in previous research (e.g., Alanko, 2018; Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). Thus, this study aims at contributing to an under-researched area on home-school cooperation and focuses on the thinking of teacher-students who are in the process of becoming professionals. More specifically, we aimed to answer the questions below.

- 1) How do teacher-students describe home-school cooperation?
 - a. What hinders cooperation?
 - b. What is the aim of cooperation?
 - c. What are the benefits of cooperation and for whom?
- 2) Based on the interviews, what are the sources of their beliefs?

Method

Participants and data collection

The data for this study were gathered from five focus-group interviews with Finnish teacher-students. Nineteen teachers were interviewed in total. Three of the groups were interviewed face to face in spring 2017 (data set A) and two online in autumn 2018 (data set B). The face-to-face interviewees were reached by contacting a teacher education department at a Finnish university, and the online groups were sent a request via the email lists of all teacher-students' national associations. All teachers interviewed online were female, and in the face-to-face interviews, four were male. In the excerpts below, the participants were given a pseudonym, and the letters in parentheses after the name express the data set and the gender of the interviewee. Thus, Pekka (AM) is a male person who contributed to the data set A, group 1 (see Table 1).

Most of the teacher-students were in their third year of teacher education. Some had worked as teacher's assistants before entering university, some had already done the in-school practicum, and one was also a parent. Thus, interviewees had some experiences of home-school cooperation as adults, as opposed to just drawing on memories of the when they were pupils themselves.

The interviews were qualitative thematic interviews in which the topics were based on the Finnish national curriculum (FNBE, 2014) and previous research on home-school cooperation, such as Wilder's review (2014). In the interview, we discussed topics such as the aim of cooperation, the benefits of cooperation, challenges in cooperation, and responsibilities in cooperation.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in Finnish. For the purpose of reporting the result to an international scientific audience, the excerpts in this article were translated into English by the first author.

Table 1.
Participants in focus group interviews

Data set A, group 1	Data set A, group 2	Data set A, group 3	Data set B, group 4	Data set B; group 5
Pekka	Mikko	Kalle	Eve	Iina
Elisa	Kaisa	Matti	Jenni	Anna
Venla	Heli	Mirja	Niina	Maija
Aino	Marjo	Nelli		
		Katja		

Analysis

Two researchers analysed the data separately searching for different themes expressed by the interviewees. Next, the researchers discussed their findings, agreed on the themes, categorised them under more general themes, and looked for connections between the themes (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the researchers discussed whether the data were missing something they expected on the bases of their familiarity with the previous research or if there was something that surprised them. For example, when the interviewer asked about the benefits of home-school cooperation, Elisa's (AF) answer was analysed as follows: Elisa said: 'We all understand and see both sides [home and school] of the child, then it is possible to make the teaching more individualised and serve the needs of the child.' Out of the excerpt above, we extracted minor themes: 'helpful for the teacher to know what the child is like at home' and 'home-school cooperation enables the teacher to serve the needs of each child', both of which were later included in the main theme 'Benefits'.

Results

As a result of the analysis and the combining of minor themes into more general ones, we were able to form four main themes. They were the following: 'Aims of cooperation', 'Benefits', 'Challenges' and 'Sources of information'. Under each main theme, there are several minor themes, which will be discussed below and appear in italics.

Aims of cooperation

In their replies, interviewees created a kind of ideal situation consisting of a trusting relationship between parents and teachers in which both have a shared understanding of the good of the child and the benefits for all involved. When asked about the aims of home-school cooperation, several interviewees identified *children's well-being*. In

Nina's (BF) words: 'I think the aim is children's well-being, so that we could support children and their well-being as effectively as possible.' Mikko (AM1) said, 'I was thinking that when you start to have contact with the parents starting from the early year, and you *create trust* little by little, this surely helps a lot in situations when something has happened at school and you must contact the parents.' Thus, cooperation with the parents was seen as a process. Venla (AF) said that working for the well-being of the child is easier to achieve if: 'we are able to *create a team spirit* (directly translated "we-spirit") without any confrontations.' As Venla said above, cooperation also aims to prevent confrontations. She continued with her explanation: 'Everybody has a shared view of the child's development and learning, because *the child is not living in two separate worlds* ... I mean at school and outside school.'

Benefits

When the aims of cooperation were discussed, interviewees emphasised the good of the child but also pointed out that functional cooperation with parents *makes teachers' work easier*. In the excerpts above, the teacher-students said that when the teacher is familiar with child's life at home, the teacher will have an easier time resolving challenging situations involving the child. Moreover, knowing the child's home background helps teachers modify their teaching according to the child's needs. In addition, interviewees acknowledged that parents know their children better than teachers. In Elisa's (AF) words:

The guardian or parents at home, or the family, they know the child. They know what the child is like at home, and of course, that plays a role in how the child learns and understands and in a way that we all understand and see the both sides of the child. Then, it is possible to make the teaching more individualised and serve the needs of the child.

Getting feedback from parents was considered a benefit of cooperation and a way to enhance teachers' professional growth, even if the feedback is not always positive. Jenni (BF) explained:

If you get a message from the parents that your teaching is not good enough, I mean, that the parents have some school-related worries, so of course, it is worth noting. I mean, do not feel insulted and think that you are not a good teacher. Instead, you can search for help and support.

In general, the *exchange of information* between homes and schools was seen as a benefit of a well-functioning cooperation. Niina (BF) pointed out that parents provide feedback to the teacher. She said, '... if the child tells the parents about a problem at school or the parents notice that there are some problems, parents should contact the school right away. Then these problems can be solved.' Iina (BF) added, '...informing the school [of important matters in the child's life] helps teachers in their work, and they are able to support the child. It would be good to inform the school.'

Cooperation with the *parents was also a resource*. Niina (BF) said,

Well, yes, I think that parents are a kind of resource, and they support you in your work. But then, I also, because I am in the beginning of my career ... I worry a bit. How am I going to be respected so that the cooperation does not start in a negative way?

Challenges

In most cases, the teacher-students expressed positive attitudes towards parents. However, they also discussed challenges in cooperation relating to both parents and teachers' activities.

Different family forms were seen as posing challenges to cooperation. In particular, several teacher-students discussed divorced parents. When parents divorce, it can be difficult to know with whom teachers should cooperate and exchange information. Pekka (AM) suggests, 'Well, I think that we should have clear rules in those cases.' Pekka had heard about an incidence in which a divorced parent was allowed to pick up the child from school without the consent of the parent who was the custodian. Anna (BF) described another situation: 'Although both parents received the same information from the school, they started to use the teacher as a middleman, and things became really difficult.' Mirja (AF) talked about her own childhood.

Her parents were divorced, and her mother worked at school. She said, 'My father knew nothing. He was a complete outsider.' According to Mirja, this was not a good situation.

Cooperation with immigrant parents can also be challenging. The discussion about immigrant parents is often connected to the discussion about the *skills and competences parents need to cooperate* with school. Iina (BF) was a teacher-trainee in a school with many children with immigrant backgrounds. She was well aware of the fact that home-school cooperation requires skills from parents as well as teachers. She said, 'Well, it is just like in all kinds of participation. I mean you need certain skills and a little social capital and like that, that you can do it, and all parents do not have those skills.' She also said, 'and then there are immigrant parents who do not understand the messages, and they do not know how to use Wilma, and their language skills in Finnish are so bad ... that they just do not know how to and cannot.' Wilma is the name of the Information and Communication Technology -platform widely used in Finland for communication between homes and schools (Oinas, Vainikainen, & Hotulainen, 2017).

The interviewees described parents who were not interested in cooperation and suggested reasons why they were not. Sometimes, the *parents just did not have the energy or time*. Taking on the role of a pupil, Anna (BF) said, 'My parents are not interested, and like me, they [the parents] were not good at school, but they have done well in life.' Besides *problematic attitudes*, some *parents can have serious challenges in their lives*, which affect their ability to cooperate. Anna continued, 'there can be cases, for example, problems with mental health that these people are not able to get up in the morning, and they do not answer phone calls...' Sometimes, *parents lack energy* because they have so many children. Jenni (BF) said, 'If there are many children in the family, it can really be a burden to help every child with the homework.'

Parents' attitudes towards school and school education were also seen as affecting children's attitudes. Heli (AF) explained: 'And then it is surely easier for the student to appreciate school and feel at home there if the parents are engaged in the activities.' One of the suggested reasons for bad attitudes towards school and cooperation were *bad memories of the parents' time at school*. Pekka (AM) said, 'Some parents can be against everything at school and schooling. They have such bad memories of school and hate all teachers (laughs).'

Although the teacher-students were aware of the fact that parenting is demanding, and they could see several reasons why all parents could not be active in cooperation, they nevertheless expressed—at times very bluntly—that there are *'bad' parents*. In Kaisa's (AF) words, 'There are *parents who are not interested in their children*.' Marja (BF) agreed: 'They are not necessarily interested in their child's life that much, and for this reason, they do not participate.' In one of the interviews, the interviewer asked for reasons for parents' indifference, and Anna (BF) replied based on her experiences as a trainee: 'The *children can be so difficult* that the parents do not wish to, I mean, even at home...' When the interviewer asked, 'Difficult in what way?' Anna said, 'For example, they do not obey; they break the rules; they rampage. An adult has no authority over them, and they behave badly towards their peers.'

Uninterested parents are not the only ones interviewees considered 'bad', some parents can be too individualistic. Iina (BF) said, 'I mean the kind of individualism, that you do not care about anybody else, just your child. I mean, they are the most difficult, difficult ... that *they do not see that this is a community*.'

Not all challenges came in the form our researchers expected. According to interviewees, *some parents* are not active in home-school cooperation, but others can be *too active*. Iina (BF) referred to what she heard from her colleagues: 'In some classes [cooperation] has gone a bit too far. Some of the parents are fussing a lot and suggesting all kinds of cooperative activities.' Maija (BF) continued: 'Some parents interfere with teacher's work quite aggressively and often.'

The interviewees discussed *teacher's competences, time, and energy*. Specifically, they worried about starting to feel as though cooperation were a burden. Anna (BF) explained:

It becomes a negative thing when you are in a hurry and you feel pressured, and then, well, if you have many pupils with special needs in your class and ... then you need to cooperate with other professionals and parents...and then the teacher, I mean, you just do not have the strength and energy, and I am myself am afraid that I will not have the strength.

The discussion dealing with time and energy was in many cases followed by reminders that teachers need their leisure and have a private life, and *teachers themselves should set limits* and keep their work and private lives balanced. The discussion concerning the setting of limits mostly

relates to communicating with parents. Pekka's (AM) said, 'You must set limits at some point. You do not communicate with parents all the time, and you need your leisure time.' Thus, teachers need to learn how to deal with different parents who want different amounts of cooperation and information from the school. Jenni (BF) said, 'Yeah, there is probably individual variation in the amount ... I mean, some teachers do it more and with some parents—different needs, I would say.'

Further to this, teacher-students discussed sending messages through the ICT-platform. They were concerned about their abilities to communicate clearly, and they discussed the types of messages that should be sent. Some of them said that only simple, factual messages should be sent, and in more complicated cases, the teacher should contact parents either face to face or by phone. Many of the interviewees thought the ICT-platform should only be used when sending positive or factual messages. Jenni (BF) reported an incident she heard when she was a trainee: 'Well, I have heard about an incident [in which] negative feedback from the teacher in Wilma lead to corporal punishment at home. I think we should be very cautious about using Wilma when sending negative feedback on the child's doings.'

The interviewees were very aware of their roles as professionals. Nevertheless, they said that parents are the experts in issues concerning their children and teachers should respect their expertise. According to Jenni (BF), '...although teacher's perhaps have the role of a professional [in cooperation], I think that parents are in a way the experts on their child.' Niina (BF) said '... *parents are experts on their child, but teachers are professionals in teaching*. I mean, we need respectful cooperation.' The roles of the teacher and parent in cooperation are different. For example, according to the student-teachers, professionals (teachers) are responsible for initiating cooperation. Iina (BF) said, 'Well, I think of course it is the teacher who starts the game and makes it clear that attending the school is the child's task but, the parents are nevertheless responsible ...'

Most interviewees seemed to agree that one of the aims of cooperation was to ensure children's well-being. Moreover, interviewees discussed their worries about *how to have the child's voice heard* in cooperation. Kalle (AM) cited the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child and said, 'Doesn't that mean that we need to hear what the child wants to say?' After some discussion on parent-teacher talks

in the focus group, Kalle (AM) said, 'Yeah, a teacher needs to be skilful ... and also tell the parent that the child is the main person in the discussion.' Kalle (AM) described his experiences: 'Quite often when you ask the child, the parents reply and say to the child, "Now tell him what you did last summer."' However, when discussing whether information on the ICT-platform should be available to children, Iina said, 'Well, you cannot give the Wilma password to first-graders but of course to older children. The younger ones are very much objects in these activities.'

Sources of information and influence

While we were analysing the data, we started to think about the sources of the beliefs and ideas regarding home-school cooperation. At points, the interviewees stated clearly where their ideas came from; at other points, there were only hints.

The teacher-students had some experiences of being in the teacher's role at school, but quite often they referred to their *memories of the time when they were children*. Elisa (AF) discussed the ways home-school cooperation was organised when she was a child:

But when I was a pupil, in our school, we had all kinds of events. The pupils organised the programme and things to do, such as festivities and playing games outside ... parents were there ... kind of normal contact between parents, pupils and teachers.'

It is obvious that these were pleasant memories that perhaps affected the way Elisa will organise home-school cooperation when she is a teacher. Heli (AF) described her childhood: 'We were a family with four children, and my father said that he was no longer interested (laughs).' Kaisa (AF) remembered what parent-teacher discussions were like when she was a child: 'There were the parent, teacher and you, weren't there?' Childhood memories were often compared to the present.

Some interviewees had worked as trainees in schools and many agreed with Jenni (BF), who said, 'Well, I have some experience, and then I have *heard from other teachers*.' When the interviewees were trainees, they learned how home-school cooperation can be organised in practice. Jenni (BF) said, 'Well, perhaps during the training time, it [home-school cooperation] was mostly dealt with. I mean, how to organise it in practice, but during the course work, it [home-school cooperation] was in margins, in my opinion.' Anna (BF) added, 'Well, perhaps during the in-

school practicum, one of the supervising teachers asked us to write Wilma messages.'

The teacher-students mostly felt that they *had not received information on home-school cooperation during their education*. Eve (BF) said, 'But then I received a lot of information from other sources. I mean from alumni ... I haven't worked as a substitute teacher for a long period, so I don't really have experiences of my own, but then, *I have asked my colleagues*.' Eve (BF) also mentioned Facebook groups in which teachers exchange their experiences, but she felt that not all the information in those groups could be trusted.

The interviewees did not often say explicitly that they had *learned something during the teacher education*. However, Pekka (AM) described what he learned: 'We were told to get to know parents in the same way we get to know students'. In some cases, such as when talking about children's rights and the general understanding of a child as a person with rights and as the central figure in teachers' work, the interviewees were probably expressing ideas they learned during teacher education.

What was missing from the data

Based on previous studies on home-school cooperation, we were expecting to find certain themes in our data. However, after we analysed the data, we realised those themes were not there. A large part of the previous research focused on the benefits of cooperation on the learning results of the students (e.g., Boonk, Gijsselaers, Ritzen, & Brand-Gruwel, 2018). In our data, the teacher-students briefly mentioned learning, mostly when they were talking about students who had learning problems and pointing out that cooperation with parents is especially important in these situations. Getting better learning results was not the general aim of the cooperation; instead, the aim was to ensure the child's well-being.

Another theme that the interviewed teacher-students did not mention was 'bad' teachers, i.e., teachers who do not want to cooperate with parents and who think it is unnecessary and not worth doing. The interviewees discussed the challenges of cooperation, such as their not having time, energy, and skills for cooperation. They also said that teachers must also take care of themselves and that they have a right to leisure time and a private life, but they did not bring up the issue of a teacher unwilling to cooperate with the parents. One possible explanation for this omission is that the interviewees, being teacher-

students, were constructing an ideal image of the teacher, and 'bad' teachers do not fit into that image.

Discussion and conclusions

In addressing the research task of investigating how the interviewed teacher-students described home-school cooperation, four main themes were established: 'Aims of the cooperation', 'Benefits', 'Challenges' and 'Sources of information'. All the main themes consisted of several minor themes. While discussing the aims of cooperation, the interviewees often mentioned children's well-being. They wished to create trust between teachers and parents and a kind of team spirit so that the child's world would be an entirety.

Cooperation was also seen as benefitting the teachers, who get feedback on their work and are able to have parents as a resource. Although the teacher-students described cooperation mostly in positive, perhaps even idealistic, ways, they also saw challenges. The versatility of families was a challenge. Likewise, sometimes parents lacked skills, competences, time, and energy for cooperation. Parents could endorse problematic attitudes and have bad memories of their time at school. In some cases, parents could have problems in their personal life so that they were unable to participate, and some parents were just not interested in their children because their children were so difficult. The interviewees also talked about selfish parents who did not see the school as a community. On the other hand, teachers could also lack competences, time, and energy for cooperation. They also needed to be able to set limits and protect their leisure time. Parents who were too active were also a challenge. The teacher-students pointed out that parents are experts on their children, but teachers are professionals. This fact should be taken into account when cooperating. As the aim of cooperation was to ensure the well-being of the child, one of the challenges was how to get the child's voice heard in cooperation.

The teacher-students discussed a lot of their memories from when they were children. These memories were often compared to the present. Besides school memories, the interviewees had some direct experiences of teacher's work, as some of them had done their in-school practicums, which is part of teacher education in Finland. They had also discussed home-school cooperation with their friends and colleagues. Quite often, they referred to

something they had heard somewhere. However, ideas from their teacher education were seldom mentioned. Yet, highlighting the role of the child in cooperation as well as pointing out that ensuring the child's well-being is the aim are probably related to their education.

Often during the interviews, the overall impression from the expressed beliefs was that the teacher-students created an ideal image of cooperation. The child and the child's well-being were in the centre, not the learning results that would reward teachers with praise. Moreover, in this ideal image, there were no teachers who would refuse to cooperate. Nevertheless, the interviewees saw themselves as professionals who were only slightly worried about issues they would have to deal with as teachers.

Overall, the findings corroborate those of the study by Huijbregts et al. (2008). The teacher-students' beliefs about home-school cooperation were a mixture of general cultural beliefs, such as something heard from colleagues, ideas from their training (professional knowledge), and their individual belief systems (childhood memories). The training of new teachers should take the mixed nature of the belief system into account. Moreover, as noted in Alanko's (2018) study, at least in Finland, teacher education does not sufficiently prepare teachers for cooperation with parents. In most cases, cooperation with parents is dealt with during the practical training period and there is no courses dedicated to home-school cooperation.

Our study faces some limitations. The data in the two sets were collected differently, which might have affected the ideas and beliefs expressed. During the online focus group discussions, the participants did not use the cameras because they wanted to enhance the quality of the broadband connection, and, thus, they did not see each other. At the end of the last interview, the interviewer was feeling a bit worried about this issue and said, 'I am thinking that it is strange to participate when you cannot see who is talking.' Maija (BF) replied and discussed the difference between the start of the interview, when the participants could see each other, and the end, when the cameras were turned off: 'In a way, it was easier to speak when you could see the others ... but now, when I do not see them, I understand that I need to express my views more clearly.'

The face-to-face groups seemed to talk more freely; in any case, there was more laughter. However, the online groups probably thought about home-school cooperation more, because they had

time to think out their answers before responding. The last online group continued the discussion for a while even after the interviewer had said that she had presented all her topics. In the focus group interviews, the role of the interviewer was minimal;

the interviewees seemed to empower each other and were able to express their views. However, it is always possible that one of the interviewees felt excluded.

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