Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education Vol. 14, 2025/2 No. 28

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35765/mjse.2025.1428.10



e- ISSN 2543-8409

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Preparing teachers to cooperate with parents

Submitted: 31.12.2024 Accepted: 08.12.2025 Published: 31.12.2025



Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): Cooperation between teachers and parents is one of the fundamental tasks of the school. It is closely related to the idea of the family's and school's subjectivity in the educational process, which is based on the relationship between teachers and parents. Strong, positive relations between these parties create conditions conducive to a child's development. At the theoretical level, there is well-established scholarly knowledge about educational partnership. However, the multidimensional nature of educational partnership and the diversity of forms of cooperation among the family, school, and local community are often not reflected in everyday educational practice. This continues to be a challenge for contemporary schools as well as for teacher training programs. In this context, the aim of the study is to examine higher education programs that prepare students for the teaching profession and to evaluate their usefulness in developing competences related to cooperation with parents, as well as to identify proposals for better preparing teachers to collaborate with families.

Research methods: The research was conducted using document analysis (education programs). The study analyzed the teacher-education programs of five academic institutions that train preschool and early-school teachers.

Process of argumentation: A preliminary analysis of the curricula of five Polish universities training teachers showed that the issue of teacher cooperation is not addressed explicitly (e.g., in the form of a separate course).

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The exploratory research conducted revealed short-comings in the preparation of teachers for working with parents.

Keywords:

School, family, partnership, teacher training, study program Although the training programs examined include learning outcomes related to cooperation with parents, they do so only to a limited extent. Given the significance of this educational issue, more in-depth research on a larger sample is needed. The findings are important for the development of pedagogy, particularly in view of its practical dimension. They may contribute to improving teacher training practices and to the creation of new teaching methods and programs. **Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Research conducted among students completing a five-year full-time teacher training program (Surma et al., 2024) shows that they rate their competences lowest in the area of cooperation with parents. They feel least prepared for this aspect of teaching. Young teachers (with up to five years of experience) also report difficulties in working with parents and identify this as one of the most important factors contributing to leaving the profession. The research led to the following recommendations for teacher training:

- 1. Enriching teacher-education programs with practical components—introducing exercises and communication-skills training into the curriculum, taking into account the specific nature of family environments;
- 2. Expanding student internships to include opportunities to observe parentteacher meetings conducted by experienced teachers and to participate in various forms of cooperation with parents.

Introduction

Cooperation between teachers and parents is one of the fundamental tasks of the school. It is closely related to the idea of the subjectivity of both the family and the school in the education process, which is based on the relationship between teachers and parents (Dubis, 2019). Good mutual relations between these entities create conditions conducive to the child's development, as both parents and teachers are committed to the child's holistic growth.

The understanding and practice of cooperation between educational environments has evolved. A review of research in this area (Deslandes & Royer, 1994) makes it possible to distinguish two trends, both of which demonstrate the importance of parental involvement in monitoring learning progress. The first group of authors focused on the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of the "family" and examined the impact of family characteristics, parenting style, and parenting practices on school achievement (Christenson et al., 1992). In contrast, the second group of

researchers concentrated on examining the impact of the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), that is, the links between family and school, on the motivation and academic success of young people (Christenson et al., 1992; Epstein, 1987). It is within this latter line of research that studies on family–school cooperation are situated, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development continues to be used in research on cooperation between teachers and parents/guardians (Sadownik, 2023).

Polish pedagogical literature from the last quarter century also demonstrates a solid understanding of the issue of cooperation between educational environments. During this period, programs were developed to build partnerships between families, schools, and communities (Mendel, 2000, 2009). Scholars also presented a vision of a school open to parents—their needs and expectations. (Nowosad & Olczyk, 2001)—and examined the significance of cooperation between schools, parents, and students (Śliwerski, 2004). Questions were raised about the school as a place of mutual understanding between teachers, parents, and students (Waloszek, 2005) and about effective communication strategies among partners (Hernik & Malinowska, 2015; Kowolik, 2005). The potential for school development through cooperation with parents was likewise highlighted (Nerwińska, 2015). The main lines of reflection thus focused on cooperation partners, the space for cooperation (institutional aspect), the meaning of cooperation, and communication between partners.

The fundamental dimensions of educational partnership include the community of relationships between:

- students teaching style, nature of tasks (cooperation–competition);
- **teachers and students** co-decision-making, self-education, responsibilities;
- **teachers and parents** supporting parents in fulfilling their responsibilities toward their children;
- schools asserting their rights, initiatives, and programs;
- the school and local authorities financial decisions, three categories: mutual exchange, charitable activities, and recreation-oriented activities (Karbowniczek, 2016, p. 77).

Researchers have also noted that optimal cooperation between teachers and parents requires certain conditions in order for it to be effective. These include appropriate frequency of contact between parents and the school; involving the family in implementing comprehensive tasks related to the school's curriculum rather than only individual or ad hoc tasks; ensuring an appropriate climate for cooperation and adequate organizational and material conditions; parents and teachers being aware of their rights and obligations; and supporting parents in developing the competences necessary to understand and raise their children (Dubis, 2019, p. 166).

Educational partnership

Currently, the concept of *educational partnership* has become established in pedagogical discourse. Polish legislation contains provisions concerning agreements between teachers, parents, and the local community. These are set out in each school's documentation (statutes, curriculum, educational program, etc.), which should be fully accepted by parents. This documentation provides the legal basis for their participation in school life. Parents' right to have a say in the education and upbringing of their children is therefore guaranteed by law. Schools are required to "constantly consult parents on all matters related to their children's development". In practice, this means elevating cooperation "between teachers and parents to the level of everyday interaction filling the school space" (Nowosad, 2001, p. 9).

Taking the above into account, schools should organize cooperation with parents according to the adopted criteria, taking into consideration:

- the number of participants (individual, collective, mixed);
- the form of contact (direct and indirect);
- the areas of the teacher's activities;
- the implementation of the school's basic functions toward parents.

Community engagement activities should be an important part of a comprehensive school partnership program. Joyce L. Epstein, considered

the originator of the theory of educational partnership, proposed a classification of types of cooperation between the family, school, and local community. She identified: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2002).

The first type involves understanding roles in the family and in the classroom, recognizing the family's uniqueness, supporting families in the processes of upbringing and education, and providing assistance through home visits, meetings, lectures, discussions, and similar activities. In communication, it is important to improve the flow of information between the school and parents in order to understand the needs of the environment and strengthen cooperation. Volunteering focuses on social assistance, prevention, support groups, and nurturing attitudes of sensitivity, openness, empathy, and solidarity among family members, the school community, and the local environment, as well as supporting educational and upbringing programs.

Learning at home is an area that is particularly accessible to parents. They influence homework and the implementation of educational activities, foster independence and a positive attitude toward school obligations, and help combine schoolwork with everyday life. The school may provide recommendations on how parents can effectively support their children's education. An important element of partnership is co-decision-making: involving parents in actively planning school activities, participating in school life, supporting parents in raising their children, and cultivating leadership among parent representatives.

The last type—collaboration with the local community—means encouraging activity and integrating internal and external stakeholder groups and institutions operating in a given community. It includes joint activities undertaken by the school and parents for the benefit of the community, such as various forms of preventive cooperation: initiatives by the school, institutions, and groups aimed at preventing dysfunctional and maladaptive behaviors; discussions; seminars; consultations; meetings with psychologists, therapists, and counselors; and preventive classes and workshops (Karbowniczek, 2016).

Theoretical assumptions and their practical implementation – research on study programs

The multidimensional nature of educational partnerships and the variety of forms of cooperation between families, schools, and local communities are often not reflected in everyday educational practice. In their work, teachers encounter various types of difficulties or even resistance of varying intensity. The primary source of this resistance may be information—its abundance, diversity, and variability. Teachers must first process this knowledge themselves and then help their students master and understand it. Other sources of resistance include inattention, indifference, or oppositional behavior on the part of students, as well as interactions with parents, school management, or colleagues (Kwiatkowska, 2010, pp. 73–74). This is a constant challenge for contemporary schools, but also for the process of teacher training.

Academic teacher training in Poland emphasizes preparing students to work with children, and university training programs are based on educational standards that define student learning outcomes. We teach students how to work with children (Christofer, 2004, p. 13). Yet, although it is obvious that education and upbringing, as social processes, require interaction and cooperation among various social actors, most importantly, parents, in practice, little attention is paid to teaching students how to cooperate with the parents of these children. There are two important reasons for this conclusion: first, the teacher training programs themselves, and second, the self-assessment of students completing teacher training.

Undoubtedly, the effectiveness of cooperation between teachers and parents will depend largely on the quality of teachers' professional preparation, including their level of professional, communication, and social competences. Issues related to parent–teacher cooperation are included in the education of future teachers, so students learn the principles, forms, methods, and anticipated effects of such cooperation. In this context, it is reasonable to ask whether, without professional experience, they are able to understand the importance and necessity of this

cooperation (Walaszek-Latacz, 2014). Research on students completing a five-year full-time teacher training program (Surma, B., Rostek, I., & Twardowska-Staszek, E., 2024) shows that they rate their competences lowest in relation to cooperation with parents: they feel least prepared for this area of professional activity.

This phenomenon is also confirmed by research conducted by a team led by Małgorzata Żytko, published in a report on the conditions leading to professional attrition among Warsaw teachers with up to five years of service (Dobkowska et al., 2024), which highlights the reasons why young teachers leave the profession. Among the factors that demotivate teachers in their daily work, difficulties in cooperating with parents (49% of respondents) ranked second, following unsatisfactory remuneration (75%).

In this context, the question arises as to the sources of these concerns among students, which are later confirmed by studies of young teachers. It was assumed that one reason may be the marginal treatment of cooperation between schools and families—and between teachers and parents—in teacher training programs. In order to verify this thesis, a study was conducted on study programs preparing students for the profession of preschool and early school education teacher. The programs of five universities (three in Kraków and two in Warsaw) were selected for analysis. Although academic study programs emphasize this dimension of teaching and students do receive theoretical knowledge about this aspect of their future work, this proves to be insufficient.

The concerns of future teachers are largely justified, as teachers often encounter negative attitudes from parents who are demanding and who shift responsibility for their child's difficulties onto the teacher or school. When it comes to challenges in cooperating with parents, future teachers anticipate difficulties in schools primarily in the form of parents failing to recognize (or undermining) the authority of teachers, especially young teachers, as well as a lack of understanding regarding the importance of problems identified by teachers and a visible reluctance to address them (Walaszek-Latacz, 2014, pp. 114–115). This conclusion comes from research conducted more than ten years ago, yet little has changed in this regard. Teachers today continue to face similar problems.

An analysis of the curricula of several Polish teacher training institutions has shown that the issue of cooperation between teachers and parents is not addressed explicitly (e.g., in the form of a separate course). The teacher training cycle ensures that teachers acquire professional competences defined as the ability to perform a set of professional activities in a manner consistent with the standards and requirements for a given professional task or job position, supported by appropriate skills, knowledge, and psychophysical characteristics. The education process is carried out through courses or groups of courses preparing students for the teaching profession. It includes substantive and pedagogical preparation, and within this framework, psychological and pedagogical preparation as well as didactic preparation, which also includes professional internships. Their purpose is to enable students to gain experience related to the teaching and educational work of a teacher and to confront the knowledge acquired in specific didactics (teaching methodology) with pedagogical reality (Szempruch, 2022).

The topic of partnership appears in the description of learning outcomes only in a rather laconic form. Content related to cooperation between the most important educational environments is dispersed across various courses. On this basis, students learn the principles, forms, methods, and effects of such cooperation. The programs include learning outcomes related to the development of soft skills, which complement functional, specialist, and technical skills, i.e., hard, specific, and executive skills. Soft skills include, among others, self-presentation, building relationships with others, willingness to learn, emotional intelligence, communication skills, politeness, establishing contact, teamwork, self-confidence, independence, and decision-making. The proper development of these outcomes will pay off in cooperation with parents. However, the question remains whether these learning outcomes are actually achieved during studies. The long-standing debate among education theorists and practitioners about whether and how teachers, headteachers, and counselors are prepared to work with students' families and the local community suggests that shortcomings persist in this area.

The opinion formulated many years ago by J. L. Epstein still seems relevant in the Polish context:

Despite constant calls for new directions in teacher training and management, including courses on parent education, parent involvement, school–family partnerships, and community relations, most universities need to do more to prepare teachers and administrators to understand and work with students' families and communities (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Conclusions and recommendations

The programs analyzed show great similarity in how they define the vocational training path for teachers. This is understandable, as they were created on the basis of the education standard (Minister of Science and Higher Education, 2019), which precisely defines the thematic blocks to be covered during the course of study, as well as a particular philosophy of education:

The education process preparing students for the profession of kindergarten teacher and early school education (grades I–III of primary school) is individualized. The start of the education process is preceded by an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the student as a future teacher. During the education process, students should receive support in planning and implementing self-development tasks and in shaping the attitude of a reflective practitioner, in particular by building professional judgment based on the analysis of individual cases. During the education process, students should be provided with individual methodological guidance supporting the integration of knowledge in scientific disciplines related to education, while at the same time shaping students' independence and responsibility for the course and effectiveness of their own education (Minister of Science and Higher Education, Appendix 2).

The education standard preparing candidates for the profession of kindergarten and early school teacher (grades I–III) does not mention

cooperation between the school and the family at all. It is limited to defining the content and scope necessary to obtain adequate preparation for the teaching profession. However, the programs analyzed do include learning outcomes related to cooperation between teachers and parents. More in-depth research on how these outcomes are implemented would be necessary.

Preliminary exploratory research has led to a proposal to enrich the teacher training process with practical exercises and skills training that take into account the specific characteristics of the family environment. It is necessary to introduce courses on social and communication skills training into teacher education programs. It would also be important to extend the student internship program to include opportunities to observe meetings with parents conducted by experienced teachers and to involve students in various forms of cooperation with parents. It also seems necessary to ensure that teachers are better equipped—during both their studies and various forms of postgraduate training—with skills that facilitate dialogue with parents, as well as to provide both parents and teachers with knowledge about legal regulations concerning the rights and obligations of parents at school, including those set out in Articles 48, 53, and 71 of the Polish Constitution and Articles 83, 84, and 86 of the Education Law (Starzyński, 2025).

This appears to be a course of action that offers an opportunity to better prepare future teachers for the role of moderator of interactions with the family environment.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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