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Don’t Forget the Parents: Preparing Trainee Teachers for Family School Partnership

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Abstract

The value of strong collaborative relationships between schools and the families of their pupils has been consistently highlighted through research and has been found to benefit all parties involved. Trainee teachers in England however have continued to report feeling unprepared to ‘communicate with parents/carers’, a sentiment that has been supported by the findings of wider ranging research. This study therefore aimed to determine which elements of family school partnership (FSP) should be considered as core content when covering the subject in ITE. The findings suggest that home-school communication is the most valued element of FSP for inclusion in the taught content of ITE, specifically the preparation for and running of home-school meetings, dealing with difficult conversations and communicating effectivelyWhilst the significance of communication is widely understood, this research argues that setting out a rationale for the importance of FSP and challenging trainees to reflect on their attitudes towards parents foregrounds the development of effective communication skills.

Don’t Forget the Parents: Preparing Trainee Teachers for Family School Partnership

Parents play an integral role in the education of their child

Keywords: Family School Partnership, Initial Teacher Education, Framework, Competencies, Communication

Introduction

The importance of strong relationships between schools, families and communities goes beyond the education of the child and are as important now as ever. In current UK society the most disadvantaged pupils, those eligible for free school meals, are more than two years of learning behind their non-disadvantaged peers (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017), and opportunities to become socially mobile remain low, impeding all of society (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) argue that it is greater equality and not economic growth that will improve the quality of life for all. Schools have a key role to play in engendering this societal equality. Whilst many studies have highlighted significant benefits of strong family-school partnerships (FSP) (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al, 2004; O’Mara et al, 2010; Crozier, 2016), parents (or other significant family members/carers) from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to engage with their child’s learning (Watt, 2016). Whilst schools have a leading role to play in supporting parents to engage with the learning of their child, many barriers exist (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Warren et al, 2009; Rodriquez, Blatz and Elbaum, 2014; Crozier, 2016) to effective communication and relationship building between schools and families, many of which are directly impacted by social stratification. It is therefore crucial that teachers develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to develop mutual, trusting, and effective FSP. FSPs have been defined by Sheridan et al (2012, p.3) as “a child-focused approach wherein families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioural, and academic domains”. These partnerships support and empower parents, reinforcing efforts to reduce social inequality and exclusion (Meehan and Meehan, 2017).

The onus of cultivating effective, reciprocal relationships predominantly lies with schools and their teachers (Ratcliff and Hunt, 2009; Hands, 2012), who hold an ethical

responsibility and have professional standards, which necessitate working collaboratively with parents. As stated in the Teachers' Standards, they are required to "work with parents in the interests of their pupils" (Department for Education, 2013, p.10). These standards, which set out the minimum requirements for teacher performance in England, are used in Initial Teacher Education to assess student performance, and judge whether Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) can be awarded to them (Department for Education, 2014).

The 2017 Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) survey reported that only 54% of NQTs felt well prepared to 'communicate with parents/carers', with only five of twenty-two questions scoring lower (Ginnis et al, 2018). This was actually up 4% from the previous year's survey where only 5 questions scored lower (Pye, Stobart & Lindley, 2016). The two previous surveys (NCTL, 2014; NCTL; 2015) showed only 2 questions receiving a worse response. Academic research has also reported pre-service teachers feeling unprepared for communicating with parents (Denessen et al, 2009) and developing parent partnerships (Willemse et al, 2017). This data indicates teachers are entering the profession without the skills and confidence required to effectively co-operate, co-ordinate or collaborate with families for the benefit of the child. Brown et al (2014, pp. 133–134) posit that "at the heart of any successful parent-involvement programme are teachers who are not only committed to building family and school relationships, but also have the skills and knowledge to do it well". The purpose of this research is therefore to initiate further discussion in the field about the key attitudes and competencies that should be expected of teachers that complete their training.

Review of literature

FSP framework for ITE

Following the development of a framework of core content in ITE, it could be argued that such a framework for FSP would inform the development of effective FSP provision in ITE. Gomila, Pascual and Quincoces (2018, p317) argue "a key question is which attitudes and competences should candidates acquire to make them feel confident conducting an efficient family and school partnership". Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) agreed claiming that a set of clear expectations relating to the required dispositions of those entering their NQT year are needed. When developing such expectations, consideration must be given to the skills, knowledge and dispositions that are required and can realistically be covered during training, as well as the methods used for developing these (Mutton, Burn and Thompson, 2018). It has been

acknowledged that developing a framework of required competencies for FSP is not a simple task (Curran and Murray, 2008) and that the process must involve continuous reflection and discussion (de Bruine et al, 2018). English universities are expected to involve schools in ITE course planning (Thompson et al, 2018) and Epstein and Sanders (2006) found many of the SCDE leaders in their US based study valued communication with leaders from the school system. Further, Epstein (2005) suggested that these leaders should develop an understanding of the skills schools require from new teachers. The trainee voice is also valuable and Willemse et al (2017) believe it is underutilised when reviewing FSP content. They posit that curricular improvement must begin with the student perception.

Previous attempts to develop frameworks for the preparation of trainees in FSP have been undertaken. Two significant ones are considered in greater detail below.

Framework 1: Shartrand et al (1997)

Overview of Model

Set against a backdrop of teacher preparation which is described by the authors as poor, this framework includes the skills and knowledge that new teachers are judged to need in order to facilitate effective working relationships with parents. This covers a gamut of opportunities stretching across Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum of Parental Involvement to Parental Engagement, as well as the benefits that can be brought by schools supporting families. The seven content areas suggested are general family involvement, general family knowledge, home-school communication, family involvement in learning activities, families supporting schools, schools supporting families, and families as change agents (Shartrand et al, 1997, p.12).

Potential Application in ITE

This framework was developed with teacher training in mind and is therefore directly applicable to ITE. It could be utilised by those developing programmes or materials for training pre-service teachers in FSP, supporting them to deliver relevant content through the use of effective teaching methods.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The author's support this framework for content with suggested teaching methods that they believe are especially effective for each framework area. They are methods that were seen

as more innovative at the time of this study, methods that provide opportunities to practice and discuss rather than just listen and absorb, and whilst these may now be more mainstream, they will not be utilised everywhere. Whilst this framework is now over twenty years old, it can still prove useful for those looking to develop sessions on FSP. It also makes reference to knowledge, skills and dispositions, without going into much detail on the later. These are all areas that are essential when developing teachers who can be effective practitioners in FSP.

Whilst the sample collected data from a significant (sixty) number of teacher education programmes, and looked deeper into nine of these, the research failed to consult trainee teachers or school-based colleagues, instead relying on what was currently being taught and what was seen as good practice. Failing to consult those recently qualified and their colleagues who are more experienced in the profession, means that they have missed out on data relating to lived experiences of the value of FSP content in ITE and the elements of practice that are most essential for those working in schools.

Though each content area advocated in this research is extremely relevant to successful FSP, it may be unrealistic for trainee teachers to develop skills and knowledge in all seven. It is for this reason, I seek to determine which may be most important for those entering their NQT year.

Framework 2: Epstein (1987) elaborated by Epstein and Sanders (2006)

Overview of Model

Epstein's (1987) model initially consisted of two overlapping rings, representing family and school but in more recent work (Epstein and Sanders, 2006) has expanded to include a third ring representing the community. This reflects the assertions of much research, which states that collaboration between these actors can positively impact the learning of the child. As can be displayed through the rings, connections between each will increase or decrease over time dependent on the current position of the actors involved. This model also highlights six types of involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with the community), which support effective engagement between these actors (Epstein, 1995).

Potential Application in ITE

This conceptual framework, which supports the action planning of schools in relation to developing FSP could be utilised to inform the content of training in relation to the ways that teachers may wish to involve parents in their school. It would however need to be utilised alongside theory that considers why these actions hold importance as without this understanding, trainees may carry out some of these actions but do so without fully understanding the purpose or believing in its value, limiting the potential of success.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The model of interlocking rings clearly signifies the importance of collaborative working, which itself indicates that all those involved have a valuable role to play in the education of the child. It also includes a whole range of opportunities to educate and empower all those involved in supporting the learning of the child and creating a positive environment in which they can develop.

Whilst the overlapping spheres are the ideal position from which to work, in reality some of these spheres may not overlap to any significant extent, for example parents may not have any direct involvement with school at all. Presenting this model without the wider context of FSP may suggest that it is a far simpler process that it proves to be, especially with certain parents. This model, as shown in a Venn format, fails to advertise the power differentials at play, which can have serious implications for home-school relationships. An awareness of such is vital in order for effective channels of communication to be developed with parents from all backgrounds.

In relation to its potential use in ITE, this model may be too broad and more suited to in- service training. Whilst knowledge relating to this breadth is useful for a teacher, it may be more useful for trainees to focus on a selection of the six types of involvement, those that are a necessity for NQTs to understand and action, as is the focus of this study.

Programme content

As previously mentioned, disposition is a key element of FSP preparation in ITE and must therefore be considered when reviewing taught programme content. In order for home-school partnerships to be effective, teachers must view families positively (Graue, 2005 referenced in Ratcliffe and Hunt, 2009) and recognise parental strengths rather than focusing on potential shortcomings (Blasi, 2002 referenced in Ratcliffe and Hunt, 2009; Molina, 2013). Often however trainee teachers hold negative views of parents, preventing them from making

the most of partnership opportunities. Meehan and Meehan (2017) found trainees holding vastly different views of parents from a focus on the support parents can provide to the damage they can do to their child's development. A study by Patte (2011) found that trainees held limited views related to FSP and de Bruine et al (2018) discovered that students often viewed parents as a problem to be remedied. D'Haem and Griswold's (2017) study goes further stating that trainees held negative views specifically of parents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, feeling that they provide less educational support to their children. Willemse et al (2017) also found students felt parents lacked the ability to provide homework support and the inclination to increase their involvement with school. It was indicated however that these were predominantly minor feelings. This view of parents is commonly known as a deficit model of parenting with parents being blamed for their child's poor academic performance (Ellis et al, 2016).

It appears from Ellis et al's (2016) study that students entering ITE holding a deficit model of parents often maintain it throughout training (40% did not differ between pre and post course surveys), even if interventions are implemented to challenge these beliefs. The value of these findings could be strengthened through a further study that increases the sample of courses from two (albeit they are in contrasting contexts), and focuses on courses providing greater content relating to the effects of poverty on academic achievement as this will further evidence the impact of interventions. Baum and Swick (2007) believe teacher educators should rise to the challenge of supporting the student's development of positive attitudes towards families. This support may come in the form of opportunities to discuss and reflect on their experiences in school and the expectation that they examine the attitudes they hold in respect of the evidence at hand (D'Haem and Griswold, 2017; Meehan and Meehan. 2017). Initiating this process of self-reflection and discovery early in ITE provides trainees sufficient time to shape their belief system (Baum and McMuray-Schwarz, 2004).

Discussion and reflection amongst trainees, alongside theoretical study should lead trainee teachers to appreciate the value of parents. Molina (2013, p.236) states "understanding the role that families and communities play in the success of their children in schools is of paramount importance". This understanding involves the acknowledgement that teachers and parents hold a shared role in the care and educational guidance of children (de Bruine et al, 2018) and requires teacher educators to support trainees to fully appreciate the integral nature of parent participation (Baum and McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). Further, trainees should be encouraged to go further by considering the benefits FSP can bring to

families and communities, as opposed to focusing solely on the value it brings to the school (Ratcliffe and Hunt, 2009).

For effective trainee development to take place, experience of FSP should be theoretically underpinned (Daniel, 2011). Without this foundation of knowledge trainees may fail to understand why they are committing time to developing home-school partnerships. Following their research into the preparation of pre-service teachers for FSP at universities in three countries, de Bruine et al (2014, p.241) stated:

> "preparation for FSP fails if the concept is not grounded in an understanding of the needs and aims of establishing valuable partnerships, the levels of involvement, the complexity of parent-teacher relations and existing barriers."

This statement sets out an argument for the significance of underpinning theory and highlights a number of elements of FSP that the authors view as integral knowledge for trainees completing their studies. Other elements of FSP clearly advocated for in research include the use of language and how this indicates power differentials that negatively affect relationships (de Bruine et al, 2018), preparation for working with families from diverse backgrounds (Henderson and Mapp, 2002) and conflict resolution, as requested by the students in D'Haem and Griswold's (2017) study.

Research involving 17 English ITE providers highlighted a number of areas either covered widely or not currently covered. Mutton, Burn and Thompson (2018) found 82% of these providers included content on the preparation for meetings with parents and 71% offered subject matter on collaboration with other relevant agencies. Findings also showed 65% of those surveyed felt a greater quantity of research on FSP should be integrated into their course and 35% felt the need to provide greater theoretical underpinning. D'Haem and Griswold (2017) however found students wanted less theoretical content and students in Willemse et al's (2017) study did not feel it necessary to study theory relating to FSP, instead wishing to focus on communication. This desire to receive further provision on effective communication was reflected by students in other studies (Uludag, 2008; de Bruine et al, 2018), which could be seen as a surprise with Denessen et al (2009) stating their belief that FSP focused modules in ITE predominantly concentrate on communication. Whilst they fail to reference this claim, support can be found for this statement in Mutton, Burn and Thompson's (2018) study, which indicates that much of the content covered fits within a category of home-school communication. A further study on English providers containing a larger sample would add more credence to this claim, in relation to the context relevant to

these authors' research, if it produced similar findings. In the wider context a study of providers in three countries found students were clear they had received preparation on communication but were unable to offer further topics covered without prompt (de Bruine et al, 2014). This suggests the programme itself and/or the students were sharply focused on the importance of communication at the expense of other content.

A meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies involving FSP training and its effects on teachers found that communication was fundamental to the approaches used by teachers when developing relationships with parents, which led the authors to argue for its inclusion as a central pillar within teacher training (Smith and Sheridan, 2017). It is unsurprising then that several of the Schools of Teacher Education involved in Lehmann's (2018) study plan to increase content on communication. Simply increasing such training however will not provide students with the knowledge and skills required. A documentary analysis relating to FSP in Spanish teacher training found fourteen of seventeen providers focused on imparting information rather than working with parents (Thompson et al, 2018). Provision that emphasises one-way communication will not sufficiently prepare trainee teachers to develop home-school partnerships (Willemse et al, 2017). Instead it is argued, input on communication should focus on the need for active listening skills (Symeou, Roussounidou and Michaelidas, 2012) and two-way discussion (Ratcliff and Hunt, 2009), which underpins effective collaborative working.

Whilst FSP training is likely to include communication as a focal point, it cannot be the sole focus. De Bruine et al (2018) argue for the inclusion of the complexities of FSP, which is something that a number of studies have found is lacking in current provision. Esptein and Sanders (2006), and Thompson et al (2018) found courses lacking content on the development and evaluation of FSP programmes. D'Haem and Griswold (2017) also found important content lacking with no consideration given to the possible inclusion of parents in decision making or discussions with parents about the development of their children. If the provision trainee teachers receive is deficient of these complex elements of FSP, the preparedness of trainees to work with parents upon completion of their training may be questioned. It could be argued however that this position simply reflects the situation described by Carter (2014), which simply promotes an introduction to the skills and knowledge required by teachers.

The role of school experience in developing FSP competency

Placements in school, which are clearly integral to ITE, allow trainees the crucial opportunity to interact directly with parents during training (Smith and Sheridan, 2017). These opportunities, alongside the observation of experienced school teachers (Uludag, 2008) allow trainees to gain a greater understanding of the complexities of FSP (de Bruine et al, 2014). It also encourages trainees to challenge their beliefs about parents. This is particularly the case with parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, where access to this group is possible (D'Haem and Griswold, 2017), as trainees often struggle to understand their contextual situation (Flanigan, 2007). In-school experience, it has been found, is extremely influential on the understanding students hold of parents from backgrounds that differ from their own (Uludag, 2008), however more recent research found attitudes worsening towards parents from diverse backgrounds due to their reduced likelihood of engagement (D'Haem and Griswold, 2017). Whilst parents from diverse backgrounds are less likely to engage with schools, it is important that trainees understand the potential causes. Many valid reasons exist (Crozier and Davies, 2007; Kim, 2009; Crozier, 2016) for this lack of engagement and an understanding of these can inform a trainees disposition, avoiding the development of negative opinions that have a limiting effect on their practice.

Whilst the OfSTED requirement of one-hundred and twenty days in school, one of the highest in Europe (Mutton, Burn and Thompson, 2018), provides adequate time for trainees to develop their knowledge of and practice in FSP, school placements may lack opportunities for direct involvement with parents, which can inhibit the development of trainee teachers (Flanigan, 2007; Curran and Murray, 2008). It has previously been reported that schools may limit the contact between trainees and parents in order to protect the trainees (Mutton, Burn and Thompson, 2018) however whilst this may appear admirable, schools may infact be looking to protect themselves, not trusting trainee teachers to interact with parents. Without the opportunity to experience the responsibility of leading on parental interactions, trainees are unlikely to feel secure in this task upon the completion of training (Lehmann, 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that trainees have been found to value the prospect of increasingly interacting with parents in school (de Bruine et al, 2014). Alanko (2018) also recognises the beneficial nature of increased interaction, imploring ITE providers and placement schools to work together to ensure such opportunities materialise. Flynn (2007) highlights four particular experiences that trainees should undertake as part of their placement: introductory letters to parents, attending parent conferences, contacting parents regarding their child's progress and attending school events. Whilst the majority of these tasks seem wholly plausible and the value to the trainee is obvious, it seems unlikely that schools would support

the writing of introductory letters from trainees for each new placement, especially on those that are short in nature.

Whilst in-school experience provides valuable learning experiences relating to FSP (Bartels and Eskow, 2010; Patte, 2011), simply increasing time on placement will not automatically result in better prepared trainees (Willemse et al, 2018). Well-structured in-school experience with access to expert mentors (Ratcliff and Hunt, 2009) should be utilised alongside taught content (Uludag, 2008) with the two elements requiring integration to maximise learning and development (Thomson et al, 2018).

Methods

This pragmatic study employed a multi-method design, initially utilising semi-structured interviews to explore the views of academic staff at five universities in the UK and Ireland, all of whom where integral to the Primary PGCE course at their respective institutions. Further to these interviews, questionnaires were used to garner the thoughts of other stakeholders in ITE, namely trainees undertaking the PGCE at one of the aforementioned universities, and Head Teachers and school placement mentors at the partnership schools of the same institution.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from each participant group individually and to triangulate results. Whilst the majority of the themes developed for the interviews emerged from the data, some of the subthemes were taken from typologies developed by Shartrand et al (1997) and these subthemes were utilised when analysing the questionnaires. These were chosen as they provided a widely acknowledged framework for the range of content included in FSP training. I acknowledge that the sample involved in this study would need to be increased in both breadth and depth in future studies in order for findings to be representative of the wider context.

Results and discussion

Teacher educator interview presentation

When asked about the knowledge trainees need to develop, most of Shartrand et al's (1997) typologies were covered to some extent by at least one educator, with 'families as change agents' the only one not utilised. 'Home-school communication' and 'general family involvement' were the most widely mentioned, with all educators highlighting a need in these areas. Within the subtheme of 'home-school communication' a number of areas were covered, with educators providing varying responses. Whilst ED focused particularly on keeping communication channels open, EB espoused the value of communicating effectively, professionally and providing advice to parents where needed. EE also touched on the need for professionalism, using the word ''appropriate". EC provided the most detail, highlighting the importance of collaboration as opposed to one-way communication and giving consideration to how trainees can be sure parents understand what is being discussed. They also suggested that communicating with those that are more difficult to reach should be covered during ITE.

Home-school communication aside, EB repeatedly referred to the value of parents and their role as first educator. This value, they suggested, comes not only with the knowledge they can provide about their child, which can support learning both at home and in the classroom, but how the skills of the parents can contribute to school life. EC further developed this position of parent as first educator, inferring on parents the title of primary educator, and EE argued that parents are integral to the development of the child. EE also discussed trainee disposition, stating "they have to be mindful of their own prejudices", which was one of only two comments across the interviews focusing on the personal beliefs of trainees. Other areas seen as important for coverage were a rationale for working with parents (EC), supporting trainees' understanding for valuing FSP, and the need to consider the support that parents might require in relation to their ability to scaffold the learning of the child at home (EB, ED).

When asked about the opportunities afforded or not afforded to their trainees on placement by partnership schools, references were predominantly coded as 'home-school communication' (51%) or 'other' (38%) with opportunities in other areas of FSP limited. Where specific communication opportunities were mentioned, they were predominantly an involvement with parents' evening (mentioned by four of five educators) and informal discussion (mentioned by three of five educators). Whilst EB confirmed that opportunities

were available for trainees to get involved in sessions where parents were learning alongside their child, they emphasised that this is only available in some partnership schools. A similar situation was found in relation to more simple face-to-face communication opportunities which they advise “hugely depends on the school” and “the age phase”. EE also highlighted the impact of the timing of placements on the opportunities trainees have to engage with FSP. It appears then that trainees are likely to receive varying opportunities, so although EA stated that “every week we ask them to look at all eight teaching standards and track what they have done in that week”, some trainees have a greater opportunity to reflect on and evidence their practice.

All interviewees reported confidence or nervousness as an issue for trainees and/or NQTs although EA and EC emphasise that this depends on the individual trainee. EE stated “probably the most significant challenge I would say is confidence”. They talked about being “confident enough”, which indicates that they do not expect trainees to be fully confident upon course completion, but that they have sufficient confidence to deal with difficult conversations effectively. When providing their thoughts on trainee confidence issues, EA believed that “parents can be maybe a little more daunting [than children] because that is a different level of communication”. Despite available support throughout the training year, EB argued that “when you actually come face-to-face with it, it is still quite terrifying”. It therefore may not be surprising that ED highlighted that trainees might “shy away” from opportunities to communicate with parents, which will impact on their development in this area. Further, EA felt that in a school where FSP is not “visible” it is challenging to “have that ownership and that autonomy”, which limits opportunities to develop confidence in leading FSPs. These opportunities may also be limited by teachers who are not prepared to allow trainees to access parents, as highlighted by EA and EC, but not experienced by ED who stated “they are quite happy for them to get involved”. In some cases then, it appears that there may be a chicken and egg issue of gaining confidence without experience, but without experience not feeling confident enough to communicate with parents.

School staff questionnaire presentation

When asked which elements of FSP are essential for inclusion in the ITE curriculum, responses required the whole range of subthemes during coding, indicating a broad response. One subtheme, however, stood out from the group; that of home-school communication, which was highlighted by nearly two-thirds of the respondents and made up 51% of the

coded references. Whilst some of the responses highlighted specific types of communication, others made mention of communication skills more generally, including this response from questionnaire F that specifically referenced the definition given of FSP:

> "In Sheridan et al's definition the key words are cooperate, coordinate and collaborate – all of these are, I think, critical for inclusion in the taught element of ITT. Interestingly though, perhaps the most important aspect is left out (albeit it's implied) and that is communication."

Two of the most frequently occurring responses in relation to home-school communication related to parents' evenings, which included the preparation for and the running of them, and the ability to conduct difficult conversations with parents. The respondent of questionnaire H gave the following response:

> "The most obvious omission from ITE is the training for speaking to parents during parents' evenings."

Parents' evenings appear to be a focal point for schools in relation to FSP and therefore have great importance attached. Although some experience may be gained with parents' evenings during placement, this cannot be guaranteed as they may not take place when students are in schools.

Other common responses were categorised in the 'general family knowledge' and 'schools supporting families' subthemes, with a number of respondents highlighting the need for trainees to understand the importance and value of home-school partnerships, with the child at its heart.

Whilst some the of respondents provided very short answers that did not provide much detail, others were more explanatory in nature, advising why they felt certain elements were important. The respondents providing the more detailed responses tended to be the Head Teachers who responded via e-mail, in comparison to the placement mentors, who completed paper copies of the questionnaires in person.

When asked which elements of FSP placement students in their school had the opportunity to experience, three of the subthemes were not required and the same category stood out as with the previous question, but even more clearly. Nearly all the respondents (94%) provided answers coded using this subtheme and it included 76% of the coded references. The most readily available opportunities are parents' evenings and informal discussions at the start and end of the day. This shows that opportunities for formal contact are infrequent and opportunities for informal contact more freqeunt, reflecting the

experiences of qualified teachers in practice. It also again highlights the importance of parents' evenings in school FSP agendas.

Whilst a small number of respondents confirmed that opportunities were available for students to experience 'schools supporting families' and 'family involvement in learning', this was not highlighted in many cases. Whilst some of the home-school communication references, such as parents' evenings, may incorporate discussion about involving families in learning, the accounts provided lacked sufficient description to confirm whether this is the case.

PGCE student questionnaire presentation

Whilst only four responses were received, some interesting similarities and differences were evident. The opportunities each respondent received to work with parents whilst on school placement were predominantly categorised as home-school communication, though one student had the opportunity to support parents' education on phonics (family involvement in learning activities) and another was able to interact with a family support worker (schools supporting families). All four respondents highlighted aspects of school experience as their most significant learning experience related to FSP, which mostly focused around home-school communication, but also included elements of an understanding of a child-focused approach. Agreement was also evident between the respondents in their rejection of the need for HEI based provision in the NQT year, with half of the respondents focusing on the benefits they feel can be gained from working closely with colleagues in school.

Only one respondent would value further input on FSP, referring to 'collaborating with parents/carers', and felt the need for increased content. However, they were unable to suggest what content could be reduced to make space. Another respondent who did not support increased content went as far as to state "I do not think this is an area to be covered at university" and "you cannot be taught how to engage with parents". Only two respondents made suggestions for content essential to inclusion in taught aspect ITE, those elements being "maintaining a child-focused approach" and the "value of family involvement in the learning process".

Analysis and discussion

Whilst a previous framework for the inclusion of FSP in ITE was developed (Shartrand et al, 1997), involving a significant number of institutions in the US, the study did not include

school-based colleagues or trainees. Epstein (2005) supports the involvement of schools in such a process and Willemse et al (2018) argues that the student voice is paramount in curriculum improvement. It is for this reason that this study consulted all three groups (educators, school-based staff and trainees) when attempting to discern which elements of FSP, as set out by Shartrand et al (1997), are most vital for inclusion in centre-based ITE provision. This study is necessary, as there is not enough time in UK ITE curriculums to cover each aspect in sufficient depth to ensure those completing training have a broad and deep knowledge of all seven. As the purpose of ITE is to be an 'initial' phase of education (Carter, 2015) there is no controversy in not covering all elements of FSP. It is therefore this sharpening of focus on what content should be core and the inclusion of three interested parties where this study adds to Shartrand et al's (1997) research.

Communication was found to be an essential element of FSP in Smith and Sheridan's (2017) meta-analysis, which led to them arguing for the importance of its inclusion in the ITE curriculum. The importance placed on communication was reflected in this research by all three groups of participants. Three of the four students chose opportunities to communicate with parents in school as their most significant learning experience relating to FSP, which indicates the importance they place on their development in this area. This is reflected in studies where students have been found to value further provision that supports the improvement of their communication skills (Uludag, 2008; de Bruine et al, 2018). Interestingly however, none of the trainees in this study mentioned home-school communication when asked about elements essential to ITE content and only one indicated an interest in further content in this area, highlighting more input on collaboration with families. This may have been because they viewed school experience as the opportune setting to develop their knowledge of this element.

Studies by Denessen (2009), and Mutton, Burn and Thompson (2018) both found a strong focus on communication in FSP related content in ITE and it is therefore not surprising that it predominated the educator and school staff data as presented earlier in sections 4.2 and 4.3. It does raise the question, however, as to why trainees in England continue to feel underprepared year on year (NCTL, 2014; NCTL, 2015; Pye, Stobbart and Lindley, 2016; Ginnis et al, 2018) when previous research has shown students wish to focus on communication, courses appear to heavily cover this, and trainees receive the highest allocation of days in school in Europe (Mutton, Burn and Thompson, 2018), which allows them opportunities to interact with parents (Smith and Sheridan, 2017). Whilst this research is not in a position to answer such a question, it does confirm that communication should

continue to be an area of focus for FSP content in ITE, and can make suggestions as to what may be covered within this. Mutton, Burn and Thompson (2018) observed that 82% of the providers in their study included preparing for meetings on the course. Similarly four of the five providers contributing to this study already make these provisions, having made reference to such content when discussing their use of role-play in class. As preparation for parents' evenings was also extremely popular with the school-based respondents when answering the question regarding essential content, there is an indication that a shared understanding of its importance to NQTs exists between ITE providers and their partnership schools.

Another element of home-school communication seen as important in the literature is dealing with conflict (Baum and McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; D'Haem and Griswold, 2017; Willemse et al, 2017), a topic referred to in many of the school-staff questionnaire responses as having difficult conversations. Being directly challenged by parents or having to deliver negative feedback can be challenging for NQTs and all the interviewed educators felt that one of the greatest difficulties faced by their NQTS was confidence. Preparing trainees for such an occasion in advance may support them in developing their confidence in this area, allowing discussions to run more smoothly if difficulties do arise.

Also mentioned specifically by two of the educators is the ability to communicate effectively and collaborate with parents. Effective communication requires input from both parties (Ratcliff and Hunt, 2009) and requires each side to understand the position of the other, working together for the best outcomes of the child. Parents possess in-depth knowledge about their child (Warren et al, 2009) which, if transmitted, can enable teachers to support the child's learning more effectively. Valuing this knowledge and the wider role that parents have had and continue to play in the education of their child will benefit the effectiveness of the teacher, as argued by educator B who felt that "valuing parents as a source and resource" was the most important message their trainees could take away. This positive view of parents sits within a briefly covered key topic of 'trainee disposition', which overarches the seven typologies provided by Shartrand (1997) and aligns to the final core element of content argued for in this research. Providing trainees with a rationale for working with parents does not simply inform them of the many benefits highlighted by research, but ultimately encourages them to explore any preconceptions they hold about parents or subgroups of parents. It may also inspire them to consider how they can be of benefit to the family of their pupil and in turn, how the families can benefit the work of the school in supporting the child's learning.

A further area for consideration that came across during the research, and does not fit particularly into Shartrand et al's (1997) typologies was the importance of focusing on the child. This was mentioned specifically by EE and one of the students, whilst also being implicit in many of the responses of the wider group. This is a central tenet to Sheridan et al's (2012) definition of FSP and as with the wider curriculum, should underpin all ITE. Another element featuring strongly in some of the literature (Baum and Swick, 2007; de Bruine et al, 2018), and referred to by Shartrand et al (1997) is trainee attitude. They stated that (P13) "our framework focuses on the attitudes, skills, and knowledge teachers need to implement successful parental involvement" however does not refer specifically to these attitudes when providing examples that fit into the seven typologies. Whilst direct reference to the attitudes of trainees only featured twice in the educator interviews, some of the other responses included areas of practice that would support the development of positive attitudes towards parents. Additionally both the literature (Graue, 2005 referenced in Ratcliffe and Hunt, 2009; Molina, 2013) and my experience of interviewing school staff during other ongoing research projects would suggest trainee disposition has a direct effect on practice and therefore I argue that it must be covered during centre-based training.

The questionnaires completed by school-based staff asked which elements of FSP are essential for inclusion in the ITE curriculum and what FSP opportunities are available to the trainees placed in their schools. The responses proved interesting, highlighting that school staff believe that there are elements of FSP that should be covered, which they do not provide experience in themselves such as "strategies you could use to develop/promote positive family-school partnerships" and "why positive family school relationships are important and the impact this has on the school/teacher/child". There was a much more even spread across Shartrand et al's (1997) seven typologies in relation to essential content in comparison to experiences offered in school. Not only does this indicate that taught content relating to FSP is required, it opposes the view of the student in this research who disagreed with FSP being covered in centre-based provision. This is further evidenced in the student responses to the question relating to opportunities available in school, which were predominated with opportunities for communication. Whilst trainees might not wish to study underpinning theory (D'Haem and Griswold, 2017) or would prefer to focus on communication (Willemse et al, 2017), their potential future employers believe that their knowledge base should be developed more broadly than communicating with parents, as briefly outlined above.

This difference between essential content that should be covered and that which can be covered during school experience is also apparent in the teacher educator interviews.

Again there was a greater spread across the seven typologies when advising on essential content in comparison to experiences that they understood as being available at partner schools. Shartrand et al's (1997) typology General Family Knowledge was selected as an appropriate subtheme relating to required content by both educators and school staff, but does not appear to be available during school experience. It is described by Shartrand et al (1997) as:

> "to promote knowledge of different families' cultural beliefs, childrearing practices, structures, and living environments. To promote an awareness of and respect for different backgrounds and lifestyles"

Comments from the participants included references to the need for trainees to understand that there are different family types and backgrounds, including those living in care or in non-traditional family groups and that approaches to education will vary. Also highlighted was the need to be respectful of the whole school community and the equal treatment of all, including families not actively engaged with their child's school.

It is important to highlight that the preparation of trainees for FSPs are not - and should not - be delineated between centre-based provision and schools. Taught content and in-school experience are complementary and crossover is necessary in order to develop excellent teachers (Orchard and Winch, 2015). In the Carter Review (2015), Sir Andrew Carter stated "the truth is that partnership is the key". While school experience has an important role to play in the development of trainees' communication skills with parents, through direct interaction with parents (Smith and Sheridan, 2017), students can practise real situations with classmates (Ratcliffe and Hunt, 2009), including potential experiences with more difficult parents (Walker and Legg, 2018). Such practice takes the form of role plays at four of the five institutions involved in the study and could be utilised in the future at the fifth. Group discussion is also used to make links between theory and practice, discussing both potential situations and those experienced by trainees.

This research argues that although the four trainees responding to the questionnaire highlighted aspects of school experience as their most significant learning experiences, there is a clear need for centre-based provision. This should provide a theoretical underpinning to the experience gained on placement, offer a greater breadth of content than can be experienced in school whilst still offering provision on communication with parents and challenge trainees to consider the beliefs they hold of parents and their role in education.

Conclusion

It is accepted that communication rightly features heavily in the preparation of trainee teachers for FSP and has a place both in in-school experience and in ITE taught content, through roleplays in particular. This research suggests however that communication cannot be the sole focus of training. Trainees should be introduced to the rationale for working with parents and challenged to explore the views they hold of parents and the role they should play in their child's education. Solely focusing on communication will not provide trainees with sufficient understanding of its purpose and the benefits it can bring, potentially to the detriment of the education of the children they teach.

Further research therefore should focus on a greater exploration of the essential elements of FSP to be included in ITE, including the consultation of NQTs who were not involved in this study. Research in this area could also be strengthened through a more direct exploration of the essential elements of FSP that are less likely to be covered sufficiently on placement and therefore should be referenced through taught content.

As ITE is, as the name suggests, 'Initial' (something which is highlighted by the Carter Review (2015)), it may be worth further exploring the elements of FSP that would be beneficial for teachers to receive in-service training on during the first few years of practice.

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