

Swedish preschool student teachers' views on family-(pre)school partnerships

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Abstract

International studies indicate that preservice teachers are inadequately prepared to conduct effective family-school partnerships (FSP), and first-year preschool teachers may find working with families especially challenging. This issue calls for more attention in teacher-training programs toward preparing teachers with sufficient competence for FSP. This study is intended to provide knowledge about Swedish preschool student teachers' perceptions and experiences working with FSP to inform development areas within teacher education. Data were collected using an online survey of 153 preschool student teachers. The results show that most participants have a positive view of FSP based on their knowledge and previous experience. Communication is regarded as the most important prerequisite but also one of the top challenges. However, they estimate their preparedness to work with parents at varying levels and recognize that competence is created and developed through experience and a reflective approach. It calls for more practical training in combination with theoretical knowledge in teacher education to prepare future preschool teachers to work with families effectively.

Keywords: preschool, student teacher, family-school partnership, collaboration, parents

Introduction

The importance of family-(pre)school partnerships (FSP) for children's learning and well-being has been highlighted by practice and research, identifying both benefits and challenges (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Harju et al., 2013; Markström & Simonsson, 2017). Swedish preschools have a mission to collaborate

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with families as formulated in the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). According to the policy, preschools and preschool teachers are responsible for taking the initiative to strategically establish, design, plan, carry out, and evaluate communication and collaboration with families to share information, create home-preschool links, and provide opportunities for ongoing dialogue. In other words, a teacher's knowledge and competence to work with families is crucial for quality FSP, in which teacher education plays an important role. As Persson (2015) pointed out, preschool teachers' knowledge, pedagogical consciousness, commitment, and understanding of the mission is related to their training. However, international studies indicate that preservice teachers are inadequately prepared to conduct effective FSP (Epstein, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Willemse et al. 2016; Willemse et al. 2018). The issue requires more attention in teacher-training programs toward preparing teachers with sufficient competence in FSP (Alanko, 2018; Lehmann, 2018; Mutton et al. 2018; Saltmarsh et al. 2014).

In Sweden, most early-childhood teacher-education programs offer independent courses on working with parents and families. However, research into how FSP is implemented in Swedish preschool teacher-education programs and their outcomes is scarce. Previous research also shows that preparation is not only a matter of including FSP in the teacher education curriculum, but also taking into account prospective teachers' specific characteristics, prior knowledge, and experiences with home-school relationships as well as how these factors influence their views, attitudes, and perceptions about FSP (de Bruine et al. 2014; Graue & Brown, 2003). By examining prospective teachers' perceptions and experiences of and knowledge about FSP, we can better understand current FSP practices and gain insight into how teacher education can provide student teachers sufficient knowledge and skills to ensure their preparedness to work with families.

This study is intended to provide knowledge about Swedish preschool student teachers' perceptions and experiences with FSP to inform development areas within teacher education. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What opportunities and challenges do preschool student teachers perceive regarding FSP based on their knowledge and previous experiences?
2. Which competencies do student teachers perceive as crucial for FSP, and how do they assess their preparedness for future work with families?
3. How can teacher education, according to student teachers, be improved to increase their preparedness for FSP?

Previous research

Opportunities and challenges regarding FSP

Epstein and Sanders (2006) advanced the research focus from parental involvement to the ideas and practices involved in school, family, and community partnership, which enable educators, parents, and community partners to work together to support student success and improve the quality of schools' work. Use of the term *partnership* recognizes common goals as well as shared interest in and responsibilities for children's learning and development in multiple major contexts of children's lives in and outside of preschools. Partnership provides opportunities for a child's all-around development, not only academically but also socially, emotionally, and in other aspects of success. Partnership is also an essential component of preschool; it supports open and honest communication and embraces parents and communities as partners who are involved directly in school improvement and decision-making processes (Flessa & Gregoire, 2012). Effective partnership creates constructive connections between home and school settings that promote positive educational and social outcomes. More importantly, a sustained partnership provides more equal opportunities for all families to become involved in a way that supports all children's progress and success (Tallberg-Broman, 2009).

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) have identified several influential factors that act as barriers to building partnerships. For instance, parents who feel that their role as a partner is not expected and valued by teachers or schools are less likely to be involved. This is also in line with Epstein's (2009) argument that teachers' positive attitudes toward and active encouragement of partnerships create higher-quality FSP. Parents' negative perceptions of teachers' and schools' invitations to be involved in education can be linked to many factors; a lack of information and communication between (pre)schools and families as well as trust in the home-(pre)school partnership is crucial (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). However, building trust is a long-term interactive process that involves sharing information, feelings, expectations, and ideas (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Parents' real participation rather than rarely receiving instruction is another vital aspect when it comes to partnerships. An important question is how FSP in education can be expanded to include more collaborative roles for parents, that is, to view parents as real partners to be involved in conversations about what constitutes a good education, with common goals as well as shared interest in and responsibilities for children's learning and development. Practices call for more family empowerment-oriented community collaboration and decision-making (Albaiz & Ernest, 2020).

Teacher competencies necessary for FSP

Teacher competencies imply a wider and systemic view of teacher professionalism on multiple levels—the individual, the school, the local community, and professional networks (OECD, 2009). Sheridan et al. (2011) highlighted three interdependent and inseparable dimensions of preschool teacher competence. Knowing what and why is the first dimension, which is characterized by preschool teachers' knowledge and ability to reflect and their positive attitude towards change. The second is knowing how, which refers to preschool teachers' competence to lead, organize, and evaluate various tasks. The third dimension concerns interactive, relational, and transactional competence, which consists of preschool teachers' communicative, social, didactic, and caring abilities. Teachers' competence needs to be continually developed in line with profound societal change (Tallberg-Broman, 2015).

Based on an interview study with 16 pairs of parents and teachers in Norway, Westergård (2013) identified three main competencies necessary for FSP on the individual level. Relational competence refers to a teacher's ability to connect with parents, be kind and welcoming, and build good relationships. *Communication competence* deals with a teacher's ability to communicate respectfully, openly, positively, and reciprocally with parents. Context competence is about a teacher's competence to observe and analyze children's environment, behavior, and interactions, which is a necessary basis for FSP.

However, researchers have also found that preschool teachers' profession in the context of FSP was emphasized differently by teachers and parents. While teachers highlighted competencies related to children's learning and the ability to interpret and implement the tasks formulated in the preschool curriculum, parents seemed to place greater emphasis on teachers' personal characteristics, with a focus on social and communicative skills and experiences rather than formal professional skills (Vuorinen et al., 2014). This indicates the complex meaning of preschool teacher competence, which needs to be considered both theoretically and practically. Patte (2011) claimed that teachers' competence related to FSP is multifaceted; it includes developing positive and trusting relationships with parents, engaging them as partners, empowering parents, valuing and supporting cultural and social diversity of families, committing to effective communication, and envisioning teachers as life-long learners.

Teacher education and preparation for working with families

Research on FSP has focused mainly on the practices in school or home settings. Recently, this issue has been highlighted by discussing preservice teachers' preparedness to involve families in education. In Europe, a joint project on improving student

teachers' preparation for FSP was conducted involving seven countries (Belgium, England, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Swaziland; see Thompson et al., 2018). The national teacher training programs for compulsory education in these countries were investigated from the perspective of program leaders. Among other things, the results reveal that no single country presents a satisfactory picture of student teachers' preparedness for FSP within their teacher education programs. Even though partnerships are regarded as a core competency for a professional teacher, the findings indicate that preservice teachers are inadequately prepared to conduct effective FSP, and this is a consequence of insufficient training in teacher education institutions (Alanko, 2018; Lehmann, 2018; Mutton et al., 2018; Willemse et al., 2018).

Mahmood's (2013a) study reported that many new preschool teachers find working with families especially challenging. The main barriers identified in his study are, among other things, lack of reciprocity and difficulties in building relationships. For instance, his study revealed that first-year preschool teachers have found that despite their efforts, some parents are not showing active participation and willingness to be involved in education. There seems to be a gap between their teacher education programs and the real situation they face. Teacher education should not simply establish an "ideal" image of a relationship; more emphasis should be placed on strategies and techniques to involve parents, and the discourses regarding FSP should reflect the reality of practice (Mahmood, 2013b).

Traynor (2016) argues that there is a lack of theoretical grounding in the field of FSP as well as a lack of awareness of theories about FSP among teacher educators. This has consequences for teacher education, since theory can help future teachers be purposeful in their actions and to realize potential relationships by ensuring thoughtful and informed practice. Theoretical knowledge combined with practical experiences play an important role in preparing future teachers. Studies show that not only professional experiences but also personal experiences and the view toward parents play an important role when building partnerships (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Peck et al, 2015), and views and experiences developed before and during training. As Graue and Brown (2003) pointed out, teacher education students enter their professional preparation with an existing image, based on their family constructions and education that reflects their own experience and beliefs. Teacher education programs must therefore provide students with opportunities to expand their theoretical background while also gaining experience working with families in a variety of settings to ensure real-life application.

Methods

To gain an understanding of Swedish preschool teacher students' perceptions and experiences of FSP, we conducted a mixed-method based online survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were represented in the survey by including both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The combination has the advantage of providing a broader and deeper perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Data gathering

We delivered a link to the questionnaire to students of a preservice preschool teacher program (semester 1-7) at a university in Sweden. A total of 153 out of 606 preschool student teachers answered the questionnaire. The response rate was about 25%, a percentage that Bryman (2018) states may be acceptable in a non-probability sample. Web-based survey when the participation is voluntarily and anonymous, and incentives are not applied, put higher demands on the participants' willingness and their priority, which could have caused the lower response rates (Lefever et al. 2007). Ejlertsson (2014) also pointed out that the proportion of participants in various surveys has decreased radically during recent decades, partly caused by the development of the information and communication society, where most people are exposed to a barrage of advertising and information, which affects their motivation to participate in surveys. Furthermore, we sent the questionnaires via their university e-mail addresses. We noticed that many students had not opened their university e-mails within the time frame in which the data collection took place. This may be because many students have changed their university email addresses to their own private email addresses in the course platforms to reduce and simplify the login process.

Participants

The participants in this study included 153 preschool student teachers from a university in Sweden. The preschool teacher program covers three and a half years. Each year is divided into a spring and autumn semester, and each semester consists of 20 weeks. A total of 20 weeks of internship in the preschool is included in the program: five weeks in the first and fourth semesters, and ten weeks in the seventh semester. In semester six, students attend a five-week course on parental collaboration in preschool.

Preschool student teachers who take their first ($n = 32$) and last ($n = 38$) semester in the preschool teacher program are the larger groups participating in the survey. The age of the participants varies, with 20% being 24 years or younger, 54% being between 25 and 34 years and 26% being 35 years or older. A majority ($n = 104$) is parent to at least one child. A large number of participants ($n = 101$) has previous or

on-going experience working professionally at preschools as child attendants. Only a minority (n = 14) lacks both experience from work at a preschool and experience from parenting. Table 1 provides information about participants' background and previous work experiences in preschool.

Table 1 Participants' background and previous experience

		Parent to at least one child with work experience from preschool	Parent to at least one child with no work experience from preschool	Not a parent with work experience from preschool	Not a parent with no work experience from preschool	Total
Semester	1	11	8	7	6	32
	2	3	3	1	3	10
	3	5	4	7	2	18
	4	5	4	3	-	12
	5	8	3	3	1	15
	6	18	4	6	-	28
	7	16	12	8	2	38
Total		66	38	35	14	153

Material

The questionnaire included 14 questions in total divided into four themes:

1. backgrounds such as age, information on their study semester, possible parenthood and experiences professionally working at preschool prior to or during their studies;
2. perceptions and experiences of opportunities and challenges working with families;
3. appreciation of their own competencies and preparedness to work with families;
4. suggestions for improvement of teacher education.

The closed-ended questions included response options on a nominal and ordinal scale level. A 1 – 6 Likert-scale was applied, in which only the endings were labeled, with 1 meaning *do not agree* and 6 meaning *do fully agree*. The distance between the

values is not exact but can be understood as smaller or larger in relation to each order (Persson, 2016). In this questionnaire value 2 means *somewhat agree*, 3 means *moderately agree*, 4 means *largely agree*, and 5 means *almost fully agree*.

In three of the closed-ended questions, the respondents had the opportunity to justify their answers to provide qualitative data. They were given the opportunity to comment on the answers given regarding (a) how they rated the task working with families in general, (b) how they rated the importance of working with families, and (c) what they rated as the most important prerequisite when working with families. Two questions were specifically formulated as open-ended when the participants were asked to: (a) clarify what they thought would be the biggest challenge in their upcoming assignment working with families and (b) elaborate on how the preschool teacher program could better prepare students for the upcoming assignment to work with families.

The participants' comments provided us with richer contextual information that supports identifying, illustrating, and understanding the tendencies emerging in the quantitative data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The comments given varied from a few words to a paragraph of 169 words (the longest). In total, the open-ended questions include 11,749 words, with an overall average of 25 words per answer. On average, 99 comments were given on each open-ended question. All participants (n = 153) gave their thoughts on what they considered the biggest challenge in their upcoming assignment to work with families. 60 participants answered the concluding question about how preschool teacher programs could better prepare students for the upcoming assignment to work with families. The low response rate to this question may be due to a decrease in participants' motivation. The question was ending the survey and targeting a different area than the previous questions. However, the responses to this question were extensive, with an average of 35 words per response.

Analysis

We analyzed the data using the statistical package SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations) were adopted and present the quantitative data showing the numbers given by the participants in the different defined themes and questions. We have no ambition in this study to investigate the relationship between different variables, but we aim to get a picture of the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the opportunities and challenges, the vital competencies for FSP, and to what extent they understand and feel prepared for future work.

We analyzed the comments in the open-ended questions by adapting the systematic process of developing codes and themes in relation to the research objectives that

involves an integrated process of reading, understanding, interpreting and reflection (Hjerm & Lindgren, 2011). The purpose of thematization is to identify core themes in the data (Bryman, 2018). The first step in the analysis process was to read all the answers from beginning to end several times by two researchers to get an overview of the material. In the next step, coding began after meaningful words and sentences were marked and labeled. We then combined the codes according to the content into different themes (Table 2). We linked the comments given by the participants to their ratings on specific questions, and therefore we analyzed the comments to each question separately.

Table 2 Examples of coding and thematization processes

Written transcripts	Codes	Themes
<p>It is often important for parents that you have a good and close contact with each other so that it [preschool] becomes a safe place for them to leave their children.</p> <p>This is where the understanding comes in, I need to understand them [as parents], and they need to understand me as a preschool teacher. Respect is extremely important for creating relationships.</p>	<p>Good and close relationship</p> <p>Understanding Respect</p>	<p>Opportunities</p>
<p>Sometimes it can be difficult to create a good collaboration with parents who do not know the language or have time to listen and talk</p> <p>[Parents] see preschool as a place where they leave their children to work and do not think that we in preschool make any difference or help their children to develop.</p>	<p>Language barrier Lack of time</p> <p>Different views on preschool</p>	<p>Challenges</p>

Ethics

This study followed the ethical considerations and recommendations described in Good Research Practice (Swedish Research Council, 2017), especially regarding confidentiality – that is, no individuals involved in this study could be identified. This was achieved through a guarantee of anonymity when answering the online questionnaire. The collected data were stored on the password-protected personal computers of the authors, and only the authors had access to the saved materials.

Main findings

In this section, we present the main findings related to the research questions including both descriptive statistics and qualitative results.

Opportunities and challenges

A larger part of participants fully agreed (n = 101) on the statement that they were familiar with the preschool's mission to collaborate with parents. Most participants rated collaborating with parents as enjoyable and important. Almost all students (n = 139) fully agree on the statement that it is important to collaborate with parents (Table 3). The importance was motivated in various ways within two themes: (a) the child's best interest, and (b) parents' feelings of security. FSP is considered beneficial for the child since it enables the staff to create a holistic view of the child. Parents may help the staff understand the child's individual needs and experiences outside the preschool, and thereby strengthen its development, learning and sense of security at preschool. They also saw partnership as a prerequisite for parents' feelings of security and trust, and it can also enable transparency and parental influence. One student teacher summarized this as follows:

As said, you are another person in their child's life and see the child a large part of the day. It is different, but it is often important for parents that you have a good and close contact with each other so that it [preschool] becomes a safe place for them to leave their children. It helps me as an educator to get a better idea of the children's needs if I have good collaboration with parents.

Participants stated that communication was the main prerequisite and opportunity for a successful partnership between family and preschool (n= 123). They highlighted communication as important for several reasons, but mainly because it can create an understanding of each other's perspectives, reduce misunderstandings, solve problems and transfer information. The latter is related to the child's stay in preschool since the transfer of information can help preschool teachers support the child in preschool and make the child's stay as good as possible. They also see communication as a basis for relationship building and a way to strengthen parents' trust in preschool. Other student teachers state that mutual respect is fundamental for collaboration with parents, or that time and continuity is essential for building relationships that in turn facilitate communication. A preschool student teacher elaborated:

For me, communication is a must for collaboration. This is where the understanding comes in, I need to understand them [as parents], and they need to understand me as a preschool teacher. Respect is extremely important for creating relationships. I need to take the time to talk with parents about their children. Knowledge is always good to have in specifically difficult conversations when I can “lean” towards something, for example take support in the curriculum or research for my arguments or opinions. Commitment shows that I care about their children.

The student teachers were also aware of the importance of preschool teachers taking the responsibility and initiative to invite all parents and lead to a functioning communication and collaboration. One student teacher stated:

You must never get tired and give up. As a preschool teacher, you must constantly continue to try to invite the parents.

Another student teacher wrote:

The parents are in most cases the most important people in the children’s lives and those who have the greatest role in children’s development and general sense of security. Therefore, it is extremely important to take in their perspective on the children, get information about the children’s home situation and in some cases also support the parental role or refer to another support body. It is also important to get information about the language that the child hears and speaks at home and what the child experiences at home as it is important for me to have with me both in terms of supporting the individual child but also when planning teaching and the design of the organization itself, routines, etc.

They also highlighted personal strategies for facilitating collaboration and partnership building. One student teacher explained her approach:

I want the parents to feel that I am interested in them and their children. I ask them a lot [of questions] and take the time to inform them about things. I have always had the goal that when parents walk outside the preschool door after leaving or picking up their children, I want them to feel acknowledged, happy, and safe. When I have this as a basis, I think that they feel that they can trust me. It doesn’t happen that often, but sometimes it has been necessary to talk about something that feels sensitive to parents, and I feel that it [the conversation] goes better if I have been careful with how I treated them [the parents] before.

About two-thirds of the participants reported having prior experience of working in preschools and collaborating with parents (see Table 1). Most of them (82 %) with prior experience of collaborating with parents found overall collaboration with parents easy (Mean = 4.23, SD = 0.84). However, when we asked participants to comment on the ratings they gave, they focused mainly on difficulties, even though the majority perceive collaboration as easy. Participants brought forward challenges such as language barrier, differences in perspectives, and parents' lack of understanding of both preschool education and preschool teachers' professions. When student teachers described challenges, they mainly directed attention to the parent's shortcomings or lack of interest, which resulted in some parents being described as hard to reach or unwilling to collaborate. One participant commented:

Many parents are cooperative but sometimes it can be difficult to create a good collaboration with parents who do not know the language or have time to listen and talk. It is also more difficult to cooperate with parents who see preschool as a place where they leave their children to work and do not think that we in preschool make any difference or help their children to develop.

They also cited factors such as lack of time and shortage of staff as challenging in situations where the staff are concerned about the child's well-being and when it becomes necessary to inform social services. A few student teachers brought forth preschool staff's attitudes as a primary challenge when not engaging in partnership or talking negatively about parents and their parenting, and when lack of time is used as an excuse for not collaborating with parents.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of participants' views, experiences, and perceptions of FSP, across seven semesters of preschool teacher education

		Enjoyments working with families		Importance of working with families		Feelings of preparedness to work with families		Knowing preschools assignment to work with parents		
		n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Semester	1	12	4.59	1.41	5.59	1.10	4.09	1.42	4.75	1.24
	2	10	4.90	0.88	5.80	0.42	3.10	1.45	4.40	1.07
	3	18	5.00	0.84	5.72	0.46	3.11	1.41	5.06	1.21
	4	12	5.42	0.90	6.00	0.00	3.42	1.56	5.00	1.71
	5	15	5.27	0.80	6.00	0.00	4.07	1.21	5.87	0.52
	6	28	5.21	0.92	5.93	0.38	4.54	1.48	5.79	0.50
	7	38	5.32	1.02	5.97	0.16	4.58	1.15	5.84	0.68
Total	153	5.08	1.06	5.85	0.58	4.06	1.45	5.35	1.10	

Competence and preparedness to work with families

The appreciated preparedness to work with families varies, though half of the participants feel somewhat prepared. It seems that the longer they study, the higher the estimate of their preparedness (see Table 3).

They perceived that they have been prepared for the forthcoming assignment to work with families through work integrated learning (Mean = 3.39, SD = 1.74) and through on-campus education (Mean = 3.26, SD = 1.65). These results may reflect that students studied in different semesters and therefore also participated in on-campus teaching and internship to different degrees. Students with one (Mean = 4.52) or several children (Mean = 4.18) appreciated that they were more prepared to collaborate with parents than students without children (Mean = 3.66). Students with earlier work experience, 6 years or longer, in preschool also appreciated that they were more prepared (Mean = 5.11) than student without work experience (Mean = 3.49).

Competencies regarded as crucial for FSP related mostly to communicative, relational, social, didactic and caring abilities, as these are the basic conditions for

creating and developing positive trust relationships with parents to ensure an effective FSP. A few participants also pointed out that their own willingness and abilities to communicate with parents and build relationships are important. They also described that being “social” and reflective or having other personal features can facilitate collaboration with parents. One participant pointed out her strengths:

I generally think that it is quite easy for me to have a good relationship with parents, and I believe that collaboration between me and parents works well. I think it's because I'm very self-reflective, accommodating, listening and affirmative. I find it easy to get acquainted with different situations, which I also think is a great advantage in my profession.

Improvement of teacher education

When we asked students to offer suggestions for how they can be better prepared for FSP, they provide suggestions that are linked to both internship periods and campus-based teaching. They highlighted the limited opportunities to meet parents at preschool during the pandemic.

There has been very little contact with parents, and it has to do with the pandemic. As students we have not been able to meet parents to the same extent [as before the pandemic] since the doors have been closed and children have been dropped off and picked up outdoors. We have also not had any opportunity to attend parental meetings or induction/follow-up/development conversations.

Aspects that could better prepare a preschool student teacher for the upcoming assignment to build FSP, are related to internship periods through increased opportunities to meet parents and attend parents’ meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Some participants requested a course in parental collaboration (which is provided in semester six) and requested the opportunity to learn about FSP through reality-based case studies and discussions.

However, they were also aware that teacher profession is a profession that cannot be completed once for all. It develops through the accumulation of experience and continuous reflection. Teacher education rarely provides a foundation and basic knowledge needed for the teacher profession. Concerning the preparedness to work with families, one participant wrote:

My interpretation is that situations can always arise that are difficult to predict. Hence it is difficult to be prepared through an education for everything that can happen in the professional role. Education has given me a foundation, which I see will be able to

expand with the upcoming professional role. The breadth I interpret can be reached if I myself show respect and interest in the college's real experiences and knowledge of the area and dare to communicate.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have aimed to provide knowledge about Swedish preschool student teachers' perceptions and experiences of FSP to inform development areas within teacher education. The results indicate that a majority of the participants have a positive view on FSP based on their understanding of the preschool assignment, as well as their previous experiences from their role as parents or their work at preschool, before or during teacher education. Previous experiences may have helped them to be more reflective and include different perspectives. On the one hand, from a parents' perspective, the importance of understanding and respect for each other as well as a greater focus on teachers' social and communicative skills are highlighted (Vuorinen et al., 2014). On the other hand, from a teacher's professional perspective, much attention has been placed on the strategies of encouraging parents to be involved in conversation about enhancing children's wellbeing and learning in preschool (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Perhaps one of the implications for Swedish preschool teacher education is to consider the student teachers' previous experience and include more knowledge about parents' positions in education and to embrace the perspective on parents' empowerment (Albaiz & Ernest, 2020; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Peck et al, 2015) to prepare teachers to work with families more effectively.

However, preschool student teachers also mentioned challenges in practice such as parents' lack of interest in communicating and collaborating and parents who are hard to reach. This is in line with Mahmoods' (2013a) findings, and it seems to be an authentic picture of problems that new teachers are likely to encounter. Participants in this study pointed to the language barrier that hinder communication with immigrant families. Others also pointed to parents' different views of the role of preschool and preschool teachers in children's learning and development, for instance seeing preschool as merely a place where they leave their children to work. Indeed, parents are different and there are many reasons why parents are not engaged in cooperating with the preschool but, as Hedlin (2017) stated, blaming parents alone will not help. Changes in society are constantly reflected in the preschool's work and in relations with the families, not least when Swedish society has become more multicultural and multilingual in different contexts (Tallberg-Broman, 2015). There is a danger, as some studies have pointed out, that parents and families with cultural backgrounds other than Swedish are often seen as "problematic" when viewed as authoritarian

and disinterested, uninformed and semi-linguistic. In other words, they may lack several of the basic qualities and competencies needed to become a collaborative partner (Bouakaz 2007, 2009; Gruber, 2007; Runfors, 2003). This is something that future teachers should be aware of, and teacher education should emphasize, as preschool teachers need to develop relationships with all parents, not only those with whom they feel comfortable connecting, or who correspond to their image of a “good parent” or “good involvement” (Albaiz & Ernest, 2020; Kingston, 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires strategic approaches, communication skills and persistence, as teachers' positive attitudes and continuous effort to build relationships with families are of importance (Epstein, 2009). One of the vital influential factors on FSP identified by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) is to make families feel that their involvement is expected and valued by teachers and preschools. Parents need to be viewed as partners and to be trusted as having knowledge and empowerment to influence their own children's care and education (Patte, 2011). Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of working with families, and most of them are also fully aware of the preschool assignment in this regard. The feelings of preparedness also tend to increase during their education. To strengthen preschool student teachers' preparedness, teacher educators should consider providing a more comprehensive picture of FSP in practice through, for example, the internship periods in preschool. This may ensure that students gain relevant knowledge about various situations and construct concrete strategies that can be applied in preschool. The forms and content of teaching would then challenge the conveyed ideal images that Mahmood (2013) perceives preschool teachers struggle with during their first year of practice, when their ideal view of practice does not coincide with reality.

The partnerships between family and preschool face many challenges, where a truly functioning communication between two partners is considered most critical, as almost all participants in this study mentioned. Effective FSP requires the multifaceted competencies of the teacher, related not only to their knowledge and didactic abilities but also to their social, communicative, and relational skills (Sheridan et al., 2011). Westergård (2013) argues that the relational competence of the teacher—that is, the competence to create reciprocal relationships with parents and communicative competence—are closely connected, and they are often linked to some personal features such as warmth, positivity, proactivity, sociability, accommodation, listening and affirmation, as some participants described. These relational and communicative competencies are then necessary for developing a contextual competence related to skills for dealing with difficult situations, for example to talk about something that feels sensitive to parents. Teachers with good contextual competence would most likely feel more confident, and confidence would favor establishing a sustaining part-

nership that favors not only meeting parents' and children's individual needs, but also more equal opportunities for all families to become involved in supporting all children's learning and development (Tallberg-Broman, 2009). Since the teacher's contextual competence is a part of the teacher's professional competence (Westergård, 2013), it is therefore important that student teachers are given opportunities to develop this competence in their education by, for instance, implementing reality-based case studies and discussions reflecting practical situations, as the participants in this study requested. Results from earlier studies (Alanko, 2018; Lehmann, 2018; Mutton et al. 2018; Willemse et al. 2018; Yamalchi et al. 2017; Traynor, 2016) also point at the necessity to relate reality-based cases and discussions to research and theory.

The results shows that preschool student teachers feel prepared to collaborate with preschool to varying degrees, mirroring that the participants in this study do not constitute a homogeneous group. Those who have professional experience from preschool or are parents themselves tend to rate themselves as more prepared. From a socio-cultural perspective, in which interaction and communication is stated as fundamental for learning (Vygotskij, 1978), a heterogeneous group can constitute an advantage in educational contexts since it provides opportunities for co-learning through the exchange of experience and perspective. There is a need not only to include FSP as a subject in preschool teacher education programs, but also to develop students' knowledge and understanding through research- and theory-based teaching (Traynor, 2016) on-campus. If proven strategies for FSP are visualized and theorized in education, the risks of family and preschool relationships that depend only on personal features may decrease.

In conclusion, this study indicates that preservice preschool teachers have a positive attitude toward FSP in general, but they are also aware of the challenges, which can be related to their previous experiences. They see that competence is created and developed through work experience and a reflective approach. Preschool teacher education can provide students with the opportunity to tie together theories and practices through both on-campus and internship learning so that preservice teachers are more prepared for working with FSP in the future.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations in its design and implementation that might to some extent affect the results and conclusions negatively. First, there was limited space in the survey for questions that were directly related to teacher education—for example, how student teachers perceive their own preparedness for FSP related to teacher education—because it was not our intention to evaluate teacher educa-

tion from the perspective of the student teachers. However, in retrospect, we realize that student teachers' perceptions, experiences, competencies, and preparedness develop all the time, which cannot be disconnected from their education. Future studies may include more questions regarding these to provide a scientific basis for the improvement of training programs. Second, we conducted this survey in the preschool teacher education program at one Swedish university with quite a low response rate. Therefore, we could not generate results to provide a whole picture in the Swedish context. Extensive studies with several institutions representing student teachers in preschool teacher programs are necessary to get a more comprehensive picture. There is also a need to supplement with interviews with student teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

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