THE COMPETENCY FOR BUILDING SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS IN PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF STUDY LEVEL, EXPERIENCE WITH SCHOOL-FAMILY COOPERATION AND SELF-RATED PERSONALITY

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Abstract: The aim of the present study was to verify differences in self-rated competency of students based on various factors – the level of study, experience and self-rated personality. The research data were obtained from self-report questionnaires distributed to 138 teacher candidates. The questionnaire consisted of four parts – personal information, personality self-assessment, experience with school-family cooperation and competency for school-family cooperation. The competency was significantly higher in students with more experience related to real interactions with parents, younger students, and finally in students who rated themselves as extroverts. Methodological issues are discussed and some suggestions for future research and pre-service training are presented.

Keywords: teacher training, future teachers, competencies of teachers, school – family cooperation, parental involvement, self-report, experience.

1 Introduction

There is no doubt about the fact that the more complex the socio-economic and political conditions for the existence of a society are, both nationally and internationally, the more demanding is the work of the teacher at school as well as the role of the parent in the family. This is absolutely true of our pedagogical reality in which globalizing processes enter with their many consequences for the most important institutions of education - school and family. Both institutions present for pupils the environment that provides them, through education and socialization, with a basis for their comprehensive development and participation in the surrounding world. Despite the fact that each of the institutions has its specific functions in this process, they share a common interest in the well-being of the child / pupil. Having in mind the Ecological Theory of U. Bronfenbrenner (1986), the educational areas of children are interconnected. As the author suggested, the development of children is best understood as taking place within nested contexts, first of all, family settings, and school and community surroundings (educational effects of children are determined by effective relationships among these contexts).

In this sense, we come to the topic of the cooperation between the two institutions of education and their main protagonists - teachers and parents of pupils. The school-family cooperation is an "old-new" topic in the pedagogical field. It is determined by socio-historical factors, especially by the life of the current family, the image of the school as well as by the preparation of future teachers to initiate and manage this area of contacts with pupils' parents. Our interest in the topic of school-family cooperation has its roots in our contacts with future and novice teachers. In previous years, there were several efforts to implement new elements related to a given issue into teacher training. However, during the interviews with novice teachers, we often find out that it is stressful for them when they are expected to communicate and cooperate with pupils' parents. The students consider this area of teacher training (compared to the didactic level) to be weaker. This corresponds to several foreign researches on "novice teachers" or "transition-reality shocks".

According to more recent research findings carried out by V. Casper (2011), the insufficient training of future teachers for working with the family may result in fears of novice teachers that they are incompetent in this area, that parents are strange to them, and that they do something wrong when contacting parents. They are afraid that parents will be aggressive and unable to listen to them. Moreover, they are worried about problems when communicating with parents from different cultural backgrounds (with a mother tongue other than the official state language); they are afraid of overall communication with parents, mainly, of resolving differences of opinions between teachers and parents. They are also worried not to have enough time to contact parents as well as not to be familiar with the ways to communicate negative information to parents about their child's learning outcomes and behavior (for more details, see Buchanan, K. S. - Buchanan, T. D., 2019, p.5).

These outcomes are alarming as it is clear that school-family partnership has a crucial impact on the education effectiveness. Based on T. Smith & et al. (2011), it is a pupil's progress in terms of school attendance, more positive attitudes, better grades, increased motivation for better grades, better test scores as well as better attitudes to school, school duties and homework, the reduction of school absence and drop out and the enhancement of academic achievements in general. According to A. P. Turnbull (1995), an effective partnership has positive effects for entire school in many ways (high levels of trust, better morale, more positive school climate, better problem solving etc.). On the other hand, the partnership is the way for boosting families' quality of life (for more details, see also Gentry, R., 2012). Consequently, in a professional area, there exists a consensus about the importance of family-school cooperation for all people who are involved in this process. The great body of research findings from various countries serves as a clear evidence (Epstein, J. L et al., 2009). According to A. Hindin (2010), more research is carried out on practicing teachers, but it is necessary to have answers about pre-service teacher education and competencies of teacher candidates in this area. The author underlines that there exists a need for research, which addresses the ways teachers develop their believes and knowledge about parent involvement. Similarly, Denessen et al. (2009) strongly emphasize that teachers are expected to build relationships with their pupils' parents, but it is important to explore how they develop their knowledge and competencies regarding their relation to parents.

Concerning the outcomes of many researchers (e.g., Bandura et al., 1993, 1999; Guskey, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990, Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002, (authors of TIP – „An in-service teacher education program for enhancing parental involvement"), pointed at factors, which are crucial in school-family cooperation. They analyzed a personal sense of teaching efficacy, teacher perceptions of parental efficacy for helping children learn, teacher attitudes about parental involvement in general and teacher beliefs about the importance of specific involvement strategies.

In this context, we would like to mention that the issue of teacher readiness for teacher-parent cooperation is examined by some authors through the concept of "self-efficacy", a personal perceived competency (based on the socio-cognitive theory of A. Bandura). According to P. Gavora (2012), the assessment of teachers' qualities by teachers themselves is the most important self-regulatory element in their work. It greatly influences a teacher's approach to the development of a pupil towards their class. Through the assessment of their qualities, the teacher activates their professional competencies and acts according to them. Concerning teacher-parent cooperation in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the concept of self-efficacy was applied by P. Gavora, J. Majerčíková and Z. Syslová (2013, 2014).

In general, researchers all over the world provide a lot of findings, which are not quite consistent. Therefore, it is

important to build a new insight for the future. G. Hornby has done a lot in this area. He researched various dimensions of family-school cooperation from the perspective of professionals (including teachers), parents and others involved in this process. The author pointed out the most serious barriers that can negatively enter into their mutual relations. It is primarily the perception of parents by professionals where the following attitudes towards parents may be observed: parents as problems, parents as adversaries, as vulnerable ones, parents as less able; those, who need a treatment, parents as causal and those, who needed to be kept as a "professional distance." The author further analyzed the barriers concerning parents and family, pupils, parent-teacher contacts as well as socio-political and economic factors (Hornby, G. – Lafaele, R. 2011).

A useful help for us, both for the educational practice and the research field, is a framework of teacher competencies created by Vidović & Velkovski et al. (2013). They offer a framework of teacher competencies for the 21st century developed within the ATEPIE Project. It consists of six areas (there are indicators for each main component – knowledge, skills and values):

1. Learner and learning.
2. Teaching and assessment.
3. Learning environment.
4. Professional development and responsibility.
5. School, family and community cooperation.
6. School development and improvement of the education system.

Our interest is concentrated on the area School, family and community cooperation. The following are the requirements for teachers derived from the above mentioned document:

1. „A teacher should have knowledge and understanding of: expert associates and other professionals in and out of school towards ensuring the well-being of each child, the importance and impact of family involvement in school life, approaches to encourage and sustain the partnership between parents (family/cares) and schools, and the possibilities and resources of the local community to support families and children.
2. A teacher should be able to: establish cooperation and participate in teamwork in diverse cultural contexts, communicate effectively and respectfully with teachers, colleagues, parents, educational experts and the representatives of authorities, apply different strategies in order to develop an effective partnership between family, school and community.
3. A teacher should be: open and ready to cooperate with other experts, parents and the wider community, nurture relations with other actors based on empathy, mutual respect and tolerance of diverse opinions, promote mutual trust and confidentiality in relations with students, colleagues and parents, be ready to take action and promote the rights and interests of each child in the school and community" (Vidović & Velkovski et al., 2013, p. 34, 35).

From our point of view, the deficit and unpreparedness of the teacher in any of the above mentioned areas of cooperation with the pupil's family (knowledge, skills and attitudes) represent the barriers in building their mutual relationship, mutual trust, sincerity and respect. In developing and planning pre-service teacher training programs, it is very difficult to find a right balance among theoretical subjects (providing teacher candidates with appropriate knowledge), future teacher practice (skills and experience with parents), general moral education and socialization of young adults.

Based on the study of relevant literature, previous research activities of the authors and their practical experience in teacher training, the aim of the present study is to provide the evidence of factors that have an impact on students' self-reported competency to build an effective school-family partnership. The role of study level, personality and experience in self-reported competency to support the cooperation with parents was verified. First, it was expected that students who study at higher level, feel more competent to work with families than students who study at lower level. Secondly, students who reported more experience were expected to feel more competent to work with families than students with less experience. Finally, we expected that students who perceive themselves as extroverts feel more competent to work with families than students who consider themselves introverts.

2 Methods

The present study involved 138 students – future teachers: 104 students were graduating from the bachelor's degree of preschool and elementary pedagogy and teaching for primary education and 34 students were graduating from the master degree of the same major. The sampling was non-random and was based on accessibility.

The study was based on the data obtained from self-report questionnaires distributed to the students. The questionnaire consisted of four parts – personal information (age, gender, major), personality self-assessment (introvert or extrovert), experience with school-family cooperation (four items were measured on five-point scale; for the internal consistency test, see Table 1), and finally, competency for school-family cooperation (16 items, based on framework developed by Vidović & Velkovski, 2013, were measured on five-point scale; for the internal consistency test, see Table 1). The scale ranged from 1 (very good) to 5 (very poor). The reliability of this instrument was verified by the use of the Cronbach's alpha. For individual scales, the internal consistency ranged from good (0.864) to questionable (0.689).

Table 1. Internal consistency of the scales and the content of the scales

Scale (content of items)	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items
Experience with school-family cooperation (family anamnesis, planning of school-family cooperation, participating at the meetings)	,726	4
Competency for school-family cooperation – Scale 1 Knowledge (methods and forms of cooperation, typology of parents, understanding barriers of cooperation, understanding the role of supporting professionals)	,689	4
Competency for school-family cooperation – Scale 2 Skills (organization, communication)	,858	2
Competency for school-family cooperation Scale 3 – Personality (open-minded, empathetic, motivated, patient, cooperative, active, respectful, tolerant, helpful, assertive)	,864	10

The data were analyzed by IBM SPSS Statistics. The normality analysis was carried out in order to decide whether the parametric tests are applicable. The coefficients of skewness and kurtosis suggest the distribution is normal. We used the Student T-test and the Pearson correlation coefficient to test the differences and verify the relationships. The level of the statistical significance was set on $p=0.05$.

3 Results

The competency for school-family cooperation and study level
The analysis of differences in competency for school-family cooperation showed that students at the higher level of study rate their knowledge regarding school-family cooperation statistically significantly worse ($p \leq 0.001$) than students at the lower level of study. The scores of Scale 2 Skills and Scale 3 Personality did not differ significantly.

Table 2. Differences in competency for school-family cooperation between younger and older students

Variable	Level	n	AM	SD	df	t	p
Scale 1 Knowledge	Bachelor	104	8,12	1,90	136	-4,17	<0,001
	Master	34	9,82	2,54			
Scale 2 Skills	Bachelor	104	4,94	1,98	136	-,303	,762
	Master	34	5,06	1,82			
Scale 3 Personality	Bachelor	104	15,48	4,57	136	-,955	,341
	Master	34	16,29	3,37			

Notes: n – sample, AM – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation, t – test criterion, df – degrees of freedom, p – statistical significance level

The competency for school-family cooperation and experience with school-family cooperation
Secondly, the relationships among experience and three competency scales were verified. The results suggest that there are significant relationships between experience and each of the scales - knowledge, skills, and personality. The competency self-rates rise with more experience.

Table 3. Correlations of experience with school-family cooperation and three scales of competency for school-family cooperation

		Experience	Scale 1 Knowledge	Scale 2 Skills	Scale 3 Personality
Experience	r	1	,221**	,360***	,355***
	n	138	138	138	138
Scale 1 Knowledge	r	,221**	1	371***	,360***
	n	138	138	138	138
Scale 2 Skills	r	,360***	,371***	1	,470***
	n	138	138	138	138
Scale 3 Personality	r	,355***	,360***	,470***	1
	n	138	138	138	138

Notes: r – Pearson correlation coefficient (* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, *** correlation is significant at the 0.001 level), n – sample

The competency for school-family cooperation and self-rated personality
Finally, we decided to verify differences between introverts and extroverts. The analysis showed that students who perceive themselves as extroverts feel more competent in school-family cooperation regarding skills – organization and communication – than students who rate themselves as introverts. There were no significant differences in the remaining scales.

Table 4. Differences in competency for school-family cooperation between introvert and extrovert students

Variable	Type	n	AM	SD	df	t	p
Scale 1 Knowledge	Introvert	40	8,90	2,17	136	1,248	,214
	Extrovert	98	8,39	2,19			
Scale 2 Skills	Introvert	40	5,55	1,90	136	2,273	,025
	Extrovert	98	4,73	1,91			
Scale 3 Personality	Introvert	40	16,55	6,18	136	1,520	,131
	Extrovert	98	15,33	3,23			

Notes: n – sample, AM – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation, t – test criterion, df – degrees of freedom, p – statistical significance level

4 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to verify differences in self-rated competency of students based on various factors – level of study, experience and self-rated personality. The data did support our hypotheses, however, some surprising findings emerged.

First, we verified the differences in competency for school-family cooperation based on study level. Surprisingly, the data showed that students graduating from the master level rated their knowledge regarding school-family cooperation worse than the younger students. One of the possible explanations may relate to the fact that students in the final grade of their teacher training program, who have already completed their practice training,

understand the complexity of school-family partnership building in the real context. As they realize they start their teacher career soon, they may feel more pressure on their competency than students who have not finished their training yet. It is important to note that the scores suggest that students rate themselves rather positive, the mean scores of both groups lie at the lower end of the five-point rating scale.

Secondly, we determined the relationships among experience, school-family cooperation and three aspects of competency – knowledge, skills, and personality. The correlational analysis showed that the competency self-rates rise with more experience. Students, who report more experience with school-family partnership building, rate all the aspects of competency higher. Generally, the experience in the whole group was rated rather negative as the means lie at the higher end of the five-point rating scale. It means the students did not enter many real-time interactions during their training and thus they do not feel competent. The training should reflect this and provide more opportunities for interactions with the community and individual parents (meetings, consultations). Our findings are similar to those of Denesen et al. (2009) who report that, in general, students do not feel well prepared to communicate with parents when starting their teaching career.

Finally, we verified the differences in competency for school-family cooperation regarding knowledge, skills and personality between two personality types. The data support our hypothesis. We expected extrovert students to rate themselves more competent than introvert students. The results show that the students who are extroverts feel more competent in the area of skills, as measured by items addressing organization and communication. These findings may be interpreted in terms of characteristics of this personality type – extroverts are communicative, enthusiastic, action-oriented, and they enjoy interacting with people (Goldberg, 1990). Extrovert students feel more comfortable in social interactions, including interactions with parents.

It can be stated that our study presents some new results. However, there are some issues we did not cover properly and may serve as suggestions for future research. First of them, the personality was assessed by a simple question – a validated questionnaire should be used to obtain more valid results. Similarly, the measure used to assess the competency is not well validated and it is needed to test its psychometric properties in a representative sample to provide data on its validity and reliability.

The obtained results suggest some implications for future research – it is important to study an entire system of school-parent partnership and explore the effect of the barriers that threaten the partnership success. Most studies (e.g. Hindin, 2010) focus on how various groups of parents (based on education, ethnicity, socio-economic status etc.) differ in their level of involvement. There is less evidence about how the personality of the teacher candidate may influence their attitudes, expectations and self-rated competency. Denessen et al. (2009) found out that students whose parents showed high levels of involvement in the past, reported positive attitudes towards parents. These positive attitudes were not related to teacher training or to the level of competency regarding parent-teacher communication.

Based on the results, some suggestions for pre-service training may be formulated: it is important to understand barriers that may threaten school-parent partnership and pay attention to them within the pre-service training (e.g. Hornby and Lafaele 2011).

The theoretical basis of the study and the acquired empirical results lead us to believe that the researched area of teacher's work and their competencies deserve the same attention as their didactic preparation. However, the current reality of universities in this regard is more proclamatory than practical. The fact the parent is the first and, for the child (pupil), the most important educator, must be reflected in the curriculum of pre-service

teacher training. The obtained results should be already taken into account when selecting teacher candidates for university studies in the teaching profession. It turns out that it is desirable to admit teacher candidates not only on the basis of the results of their secondary school studies, but also to include at least interviews with teacher candidates in the admission process. Concerning the first contacts with the teacher candidates, it is possible to determine their communication skills, which are improved in the study process. When innovating teacher training study programs, it is necessary to respect the fact that in addition to theoretical knowledge, the future teacher has to gain sufficient personal experience in communication with parents, acquire the ability to work with pedagogical documentation related to the social (family) environment of the pupil and its peculiarities as well as gain competencies for developing pedagogical culture of parents etc. One of the ways to eliminate barriers in (novice) teacher - parent communication is to re-evaluate the content of pedagogical practice with respect to the various roles that the teacher implements in practice as well as finding a balance between theoretical and practical component of training.

5 Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to verify differences in self-rated competency of students based on various factors – the level of study, experience and self-rated personality. The study results are based on self-report of 138 future teachers who rated their experience with school- family cooperation, competency (measured by three aspects (knowledge, skills, personality), and their personality type. The competency scores are higher with more experience. Students who rate themselves as extroverts feel more competent to work with parents in their future practice. We suggest to employ validated and more detailed measures in future studies to provide a complex understanding of how the competency for school-family partnership is built.

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