

Preparing for parents: how Australian teacher education is addressing the question of parent-school engagement

Abstract:

Parent-school engagement is widely embraced as a policy and educational ideal, yet to date there are few studies of how teacher education prepares students for this important aspect of their professional lives. In this paper, we consider findings from a recent Australian study that explored how the issue of parent-school relations is currently addressed in Australian initial teacher education programs. The study is situated within the broader policy context of teaching standards. Our findings challenge suggestions that parent-school engagement is largely absent from pre-service programs, and although the study recognizes gaps and discontinuities, it also identifies four key domains in which initial teacher education currently prepares students for parent engagement. We argue that students are being prepared for parent-school engagement in a variety of ways, but that there is insufficient continuity to ensure that all beginning teachers have a thorough understanding of how to work effectively with parents.

Background: preparing pre-service teachers for parent engagement

The relationship between schools and parents is complex, dynamic and at times, difficult and problematic. Research in Australia echoes concerns internationally that identifies parent-school relations as a contested domain with significant implications for school students, teachers, families and communities (Archer, 2010; Avvisati, Besbas & Guyon, 2010; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Macfarlane, 2008, 2009; Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004; Valenzuela, 2002; Vincent, 2000). As discussed in a considerable body of research, the relationships between parents and schools is an important dimension of children's learning and school experience (see, for example, Anderson & Minke, 2007; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider & Simpkins, 2004; Jeynes, 2010). Importantly, researchers in both the USA and Australia have pointed to a lack of instruction and limited theorizing in the area of parent engagement and family-school partnerships as an area of considerable concern for teacher education (Daniel, 2011; Jordan, Orozco and Averett, 2002). Despite the importance of parent-school relations to student learning, participation and outcomes, and the importance of teachers in developing and maintaining relationships with parents (Anderson & Minke, 2007), the inclusion of parent engagement in teacher preparation programs in Australia has yet to be systematically documented.

In this paper we discuss findings from an exploratory study of the place of parent engagement in Australian pre-service teacher education programs. Our initial attempts to map the preparation of pre-service students for addressing parent-school relations reveals a remarkably diffuse and changing constellation comprising stand-alone units, special interest subjects/units (heretofore referred to as units) and programs, inclusions embedded within foundational areas of educational study, and experiences of parent engagement during practicum placements. Our study also suggests that while teacher education prepares beginning teachers for parent engagement in a variety of ways, more could be done to ensure continuity across programs and in the tertiary sector more broadly to ensure that all beginning teachers enter the profession sufficiently equipped for this complex and important aspect of teachers' work.

Our study was undertaken as the Australian and State and Territory governments, in consultation with a range of stakeholders, were in the process of negotiating national standards for ongoing teacher accreditation (Bloomfield, 2009; Thomas, 2008). In this context, we see such research as useful for thinking through issues associated with the ways that pre-service, beginning, and indeed, experienced teachers learn about, enact, and reflect upon their professional practice in relation to the parents of the school children they teach. Echoing the importance of parent and community involvement, the *Family Schools Partnership Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010) urges:

Family-school communication needs to be taken seriously and must be valued, recognised, and rewarded by schools and education systems. It is essential to provide teachers and school leaders with education and training programs to prepare them to communicate effectively with families in an approachable manner. It is equally important to empower and encourage families to communicate effectively with schools' (DEEWR, 2010: 6).

Despite the potential promise of such policy agendas, it is important to recognise that across Anglophone nations, concerns have been raised about whether the policy ideal of parent engagement is realised at the school level (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Nakagawa, 2000). In part, this is a question of professional preparation, and whether teachers and principals are adequately equipped for developing and sustaining effective parent-

school relationships. As Baum & McMurray-Schwarz note of their American study, although pre-service teachers made positive comments about the potential relationships, they ‘expressed concerns about the quality of the teacher-family relationship’ (2004: p. 58). In the Australian context, some commentators have observed that professional preparation for teachers and principals in managing relationships and partnerships with parents and families is limited (McConchie, 2004; MacGregor, 2005).

The call for greater attention to family-school communication within teacher education is echoed across other Anglophone countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, researchers have noted the significant shift in expectations placed upon graduate teachers, whose understandings of parental involvement are likened to ‘a laundry list of things that good parents do for their children’s education’ (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St Loius, & George, 2004: 3). Similar issues have been raised in the American context (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Brand, 1996; Epstein 2001; Ferrara & Ferrara 2005). Hargreaves (1999) points out the anxiety experienced by teachers about their relationships with parents, identifying ‘the problem of unpreparedness’ as a particular issue in accounting for why ‘the more pervasive reality is often very different’ from the rhetoric and research concerning partnerships. Hargreaves notes that ‘Few teachers are trained how to interact and work effectively with parents, or even with adults in general. They are unprepared to work with the conflicts, crises and general emotional turmoil that parent communication and criticism throw at them’ (1999: 2).

In Australia, the National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning Project reported findings from a national survey of teachers showing that:

...82 per cent of teachers feel they need more professional learning in the area of parent and community involvement, highlighting the importance of this to teachers and schools. This was chosen by a larger proportion of teachers in the sample than any other listed topic (Doecke, Parr, North, Gale, Long, Mitchell, Rennie, & Williams, 2008: 6).

In light of the above, our study is interested in shedding light on the ways that pre-service teacher education addresses parent engagement, with a view to better understanding whether, to what extent, and in what ways beginning teachers learn

about this important aspect of their professional lives. The view taken here is that establishing and maintaining positive parent-school relations is crucial to teachers' professional practice, and therefore merits a consistent place in all pre-service teacher education programs.

However, our findings suggest that the variable ways in which parent engagement is addressed in teacher education make it difficult to establish the frequency and depth with which student learning on this topic can be ensured. While it is clear that some programs attend to the topic only minimally, others maintain it as a focus that is integrated and extended across programs.

Teacher professional standards and the 'parent' question

The increased policy emphasis on the benefits of collaborative relationships between families and schools is reflected in state-based professional standards documents developed at different times over recent years in all Australian states and territories except the ACT. Although standards differ across states and territories, they share a common commitment to the need for graduate teachers to be able to build effective partnerships and communicate effectively with parents and caregivers, including when reporting on student assessment and progress. Building on current teacher regulatory authorities in accrediting pre-service teacher education programs, the 'Draft National Professional Teacher Standards Framework' (AITSL, 2010) reflects policy aims to promote national consistency in standards linked to registration, accreditation, professional learning and career progression. Currently still in a consultation stage, the draft standards outline a number of aspects relating to family-school relations ('Standard 7: Contribute to the school and the professional community').

One key area of debate in the draft standards has been their departure from an earlier, more dynamic and active approach towards parent engagement in state professional standards (eg 'Demonstrate the capacity to communicate effectively with parents and caregivers' (NSW Institute of Teaching Standards: 7.1.1); 'Employ strategies building effective relationships with students, parents and colleagues' (Victorian Standards for Graduating Teachers: 6.1). In the National Professional Standards, the emphasis is placed on the less active and less demonstrative notion of 'understanding'. Standard

7.5, for example, stipulates that Graduate teachers are expected to ‘Understand the importance of involving parents/caregivers in the learning of their children’. This issue has been taken up in state submissions to AITSL. The submission from the Professional Teachers’ Council of NSW in response to the draft standards, for example, suggests the need to:

‘Replace the verbs “to know and understand” with skills that are more powerful active verbs that are readily observable and identifiable in teacher performance. The standards must require that a teacher be able to demonstrate that they can do something (in particular). For example, “...demonstrates an understanding ofwhen ...”, “apply their understanding to ...”. We recommend inclusion of words such as demonstrate, apply, implement and enter similar verbs to help clearly measure its descriptor has been achieved’ (Professional Teachers’ Council NSW, 2010).

The same issue is raised in the submission from the Queensland College of Teachers: ‘Standard 7.5 implies that Graduates only have to ‘understand’ the importance of involving parents/caregivers – the descriptor for the Proficient level should apply, i.e. ‘establish and maintain respectful and collaborative relationships with parents/caregivers’ ... (2010: 3). Further, they add that ‘Additional descriptors also could be considered along the lines of... strategies for involving students in community-based learning and for developing partnerships with family and community’ (QLD College of Teachers, 2010: 5).

These are more than minor semantic distinctions, and draw attention to the potential disjuncture between teachers having an awareness or understanding of the importance of parent/caregiver engagement in schools, and developing strategies and competencies to actively establish and maintain such relationships. As public statements of what constitutes graduate teacher quality and capacities, standards provide a framework that makes explicit the knowledge and skills required at different stages across teachers’ careers, including those needed for building and maintaining family-school relationships. Despite a clear commitment across pre-service programs to developing graduate teachers’ understanding of the importance of such relationships, the extent to which teacher education graduates should be required to translate this understanding into demonstrating competency in engaging with parents/carers remains a subject of debate. In particular, the more practical aspects of developing effective communication and relationship building skills can fall outside

the purview of teacher education programs that see their primary responsibility as preparing students for classroom teaching.

It is important to acknowledge the complexities at work in the coordination of pre-service programs with multiple stakeholders:

- a) the already crowded curriculum of both schools and university teacher preparation programs;
- b) finding and managing student placements in a climate reliant upon maintaining good relationships between professional placement units and schools, where there is competition between universities for student placements, and schools and in which mentor teachers are not necessarily compensated adequately for the time and effort that goes into pre-service student mentoring;
- c) the complexity (especially in an increasingly de-regulated and expanding tertiary education market-place) of determining student suitability and monitoring their performance on practicum; and
- d) the degree of diligence and caution that may need to be exercised where inexperienced university students are to interact in what can be delicate and complicated relationships between schools and parents (Epstein, 2001; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2008; Lasky, 2000; Macfarlane, 2009).

However, researchers in the United States, in particular, have provided examples of how such experiences might be gained by pre-service teachers, and have shown that such activities can have significant impacts on pre-service student beliefs and attitudes about parents (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Epstein 2002; Hiatt-Michael 2001). As we discuss in following sections, Australian teacher education programs struggle with the complexities outlined above, with those we interviewed often lamenting the difficulties of making room in a crowded curriculum for a topic that students, and indeed some schools, may see as superfluous to the work of classroom teaching.

Notes about the study

Our study¹ involved semi-structured interviews with 35 teacher educators whose teaching addresses the area of parent-school engagement. 15 Australian universities in

¹ This study was undertaken as part of a larger project commissioned by the following parent representative organizations in the Australian state of New South Wales: *NSW Parents' Council*,

New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland agreed to take part in the study. Telephone interviews of approximately 20 minutes' duration were audio-recorded using a digital recording device, and electronic voice files were transcribed and anonymised. The study also explored documentary information collated from 38 Australian university handbooks and websites about programs and units of study in order to identify the range of units on offer that deal explicitly with issues pertaining to parent-school engagement. Our aim was to undertake an exploratory study that would provide a factual indication of the different ways in which pre-service teacher education programs currently prepare undergraduate students for engaging with parents and families. Documentary information about units of study that specifically include reference to working with parents and families, together with interviews, was considered a useful means of gathering a broad base of information for the purposes described.

Participants were initially contacted via recommendations from heads of department/heads of program, or referred to the research team by participating colleagues, on the basis of the relevance of their teaching areas to the concerns of the study. In this way, a purposive sample of participants who had close knowledge of their university's teacher education programs, as well as of the specific subjects in which parent engagement is included, was able to be selected. Purposive sampling in qualitative research studies of this sort involves the selection of individuals "based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions" (Teddlie & Yu, 2007: 77), rather than selection of a representative sample from a total population. In this case, our interest in the selection of participants was to identify teacher educators whose substantive teaching and/or programmatic content of which they have oversight would best position them to provide informed comment with regard to this particular topic area. Interviewees were invited to discuss the ways that parent-school engagement is covered both in their teaching, and within their university programs more broadly.

Council of Catholic Schools Parents in NSW & ACT, and the Federation of NSW Parents' and Citizens' Associations and funded by the NSW Department of Education to produce teacher professional development programs and initial teacher education resources on the topic of engaging with parents, carers and families. The research was approved by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number N2011-36.

Semi-structured interview questions were informed by program and course documentation collated prior to the interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on distinctive aspects of the ways that parent engagement is addressed in the programs and courses in which they had responsibility for teaching and/or program coordination. Participants were asked to describe how parent engagement is addressed in subjects that they teach, and invited to give examples of formal and informal ways that the topic is addressed. They were also invited to comment on whether and in what ways the topic is taught elsewhere in their particular teacher education program, and what the effects of its place in the teaching standards have been on its inclusion within courses and programs. Participants were also asked to comment on student attitudes toward parent-school engagement. This research proved timely as many teacher educators reported they were in the process of redesigning their pre-service programs in line with the National Standards implementation schedule of 2013.

As is generally the case with qualitative interviews, we aimed to “see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee” (King, 2004: 11), and to understand how their perspectives might contribute to a better descriptive overview of current pre-service teacher preparation for engaging with parents. Interview data supported the categories that we identified in the analysis of textual data, which together provide the basis for the four domains discussed in greater detail in the latter half of this paper. In addition, interviews provided clarification of questions raised in preliminary analysis of textual data, and discussed issues that highlighted potential constraints in mapping the inclusion of a topic that is taught in multiple ways across a number of different programs and institutions.

Four key domains in which pre-service teachers learn about parent-school engagement

As described above, four key domains were identified from available documentary sources, and confirmed and elaborated upon in participant interviews as the most common sites within pre-service programs for preparing pre-service teacher education students for understanding and working effectively with parents. Our initial review of documentary information regarding current courses, corroborated where possible with interview data, identified only 15 universities offering units in undergraduate pre-

service teacher education programs (primary and secondary) that referred explicitly to parents and families. These are summarized in the table below:

Number of universities	General foundational units that specifically refer to parents/families	Stand alone units in special interest areas	Stand-alone units (families, partnerships, professional communications)	Practicum
2	✓	✓	✓	✓
1	✓	✓	✓	
1	✓	✓		✓
2		✓	✓	
2	✓	✓		
3	✓		✓	
1			✓	✓
3			✓	

Table 1: Australian universities offering pre-service teacher education units (in primary and secondary programs) specifically addressing issues regarding parents and families.

The first of the four domains represented in Table 1 above is the inclusion of family-school relations within **general, foundational approaches**, and in particular within units that introduce students to the broader socio-cultural, historical and ecological contexts of education. The second domain is **stand-alone units in special interest areas of study** such as those included in programs for Indigenous and NESB/EAL education, special needs education and the education of rural/remote students and boys. The third domain is **stand-alone units explicitly devoted to addressing questions of parent or community engagement**, including topics such as professional communication with parents, families and/or communities. Finally, **professional experience** (also referred to as school placement or practicum) was identified as a fourth domain in which students learn about working effectively with parents, families and the community.

As indicated in Table 1, we found only two universities in which pre-service teachers were likely to encounter issues specifically pertaining to parent-school engagement in all four domains. Twelve universities in total offered stand-alone units devoted explicitly to addressing parent engagement, while only four specifically addressed parent engagement in practicum units. It is important to note that not all universities agreed to participate in the study, making ours a partial, rather than a comprehensive mapping. However, as discussed in the introduction, and again in greater detail in the remaining sections of this paper, our study highlights a lack of continuity across programs and in the sector more broadly, and supports calls from the research

literature regarding the need for greater consistency in preparing pre-service teachers for working with parents.

1. General, foundational approaches: socio-cultural perspectives

Pre-service programs address the area of school-family relations within foundational first year units that introduce the pre-service teacher to the broader socio-cultural, historical and ecological contexts of education. These units generally relate to Standard 2.9 of the Draft National Standards ‘Know about Australia, its history, environment and people, particularly Australia’s Indigenous peoples and cultures. They understand how the changing nature of society, within and beyond Australia, impacts on teaching and learning’, as well as Standard 7.5: ‘Understand the importance of involving parents/caregivers in the learning of their children’. Typically, these units approach diversity and difference from a social justice perspective and adopt a critical approach to contemporary schooling practices and processes. They tend to situate the relationships between families and schooling within broader sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts, highlighting how family structures, histories and circumstance can impact on students’ schooling. Units may also highlight the importance of recognizing student and family linguistic and cultural diversity within inclusive, relevant and responsive teaching and learning programs. As one teacher educator described their first year unit:

“In the sociology unit we’re looking at issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity and their impact upon school outcomes and one of things we encourage students to understand is that they have to engage with the diversity of class and gender and racial and ethnic backgrounds in their communities if they want to improve the outcomes of the students from those communities.”

Foundational units aim to provide pre-service teachers with a critical understanding of the social, cultural and political context in which teachers work, and to encourage students to develop sensitivity to family and community contexts. As one participant who teaches a large foundational unit explains:

“My unit...talks about the context that surrounds education. So, I try and situate that information as this is something that you will need to have...given some thought to, and have some insights and made, you know some progress towards where it's going to work for you. And given that it's often one of the first two units that they do...I'm hoping that whatever thinking they start off here, gets built on throughout the rest of their program...The idea is to get people thinking about

this stuff rather than just thinking about you know, what do you do if people are being disruptive or, those sorts of questions.”

These approaches in broader, foundational units largely correspond to Standard 1 of the draft National Professional Standards for Teachers (2010): ‘*Know their students and how they learn*’, which requires graduate teachers to ‘Know and understand the diversity of social cultural backgrounds of students, including Indigenous students. They understand the effects these can have on student learning’ (draft NPST: 1.1). Foundational units therefore provide an effective backdrop to the more in-depth consideration of this topic that subsequently takes place in stand-alone units addressing school-family relations.

2. *Stand-alone units in special interest areas of study*

Relationships between schools and families are also addressed within stand-alone units in specialist interest areas of studies, such as Indigenous and NESB/EAL education, special needs and disabilities education, and to a lesser extent, rural/remote education and boys’ education. Across the universities in our study, such stand-alone units appeared to provide the most in-depth consideration of parent-school engagement. These units tend to address underlying concepts of inclusive schooling and community engagement, and to offer specific strategies relating to communication with parents, families, communities and para-professionals.

Indigenous education is one of the most commonly addressed special interest areas of study covered within general, foundational units *and* as a focus in stand-alone units. Stand-alone Indigenous education units tend to share a consistent focus on the need for graduate teachers to be knowledgeable and sensitive to the history, cultural values, traditions and expectations of Indigenous people, the impact of government policies and practices, and the family/community contexts of Indigenous students. As one participant explained:

“One of the main issues I think is an understanding of Indigenous history and the issues impact on Indigenous learners, and then importantly, how to engage with parents and community to resolve those issues.”

Some stand-alone units also teach pre-service teachers about the importance of consultation with local Indigenous communities, and respecting the strengths and

cultural resources they can offer, as well as teaching strategies for seeking parental and community involvement in education. Such units build awareness of policies relating to multiculturalism, anti-racism, citizenship and human rights, and a number also address communication skills and competencies, focusing on Aboriginal communication styles and protocols.

Pre-service programs also offer stand-alone units that address the area of NESB/EAL learners within a focus on multiculturalism, or incorporate these into units dealing with cultural diversity and inclusive strategies. Family-school relations are chiefly addressed as a matter of cultural diversity and the impact of differences in values, languages and customs between the home and school.

Special needs education is another special interest area where stand-alone units focus on the interface between teachers and parents/caregivers, as well as para-professionals, with a view to preparing students to support families of children with special needs. Such units tend to place significant emphasis on teachers as professionals with awareness of their ethical and legal responsibilities in collaborating with families and para-professionals, and with interpersonal, intercultural communication skills. For example, one participant described their university's special education programs in this way:

“The issue of working with families and parents is embedded in every single one of those subjects [undergraduate and postgraduate special education units].... it is a critical part of every single one of the subjects. It is not always specified in learning outcomes, but it is covered in every lecture topic, in the undergraduate and the postgraduate...and also the students are explicitly practising skills, they're taught how to communicate well with parents, carers and parents.... how to run an individualised education plan meeting, and how to make a presentation to a school or to a group of parents, about contentious issues that relate to inclusion.”

Interviews with teacher educators in these areas highlighted significant student interest in units that provided students with practical skills in communicating with parents and the broader school community. For example:

“The unit where we do a lot of practising with communication is in Inclusive Education- it's an extremely popular unit, we get about over 60 students who want to do that unit, and they come not only from education, but also from psychology and social work and occupational therapy.”

A smaller number of stand-alone units address specific issues including boys' education and issues of family-school relations with rural/remote learners. In boys' education, the principles of family/community-school partnerships are held as crucial to improving educational outcomes. Similarly, units concerned with rural/remote education emphasise the need for teacher awareness of the particular needs and circumstances of non-metropolitan learners, and for skills in enhancing school-community participation.

3. *Stand-alone units: families, partnerships and professional communications*

Broadly, stand-alone units tend to focus on the teacher's role as a professional in developing effective relationships with parents/caregivers and the wider community, including other educational professionals. Across this category of stand-alone units, reporting and feedback on student progress is one of the most consistently addressed topics, presented as a key area of interface between parents/carers and teachers. Stand-alone units specifically addressing practical, effective communication skills oriented towards teacher interactions with students, parents, colleagues and the community are less frequently offered, and most commonly as electives within third or fourth year programs.

The narrower focus on practical communication skills was seen by teacher educators in our study to be due to lack of time in a crowded program, and further constrained by the increasingly higher proportion of off-site students in pre-service cohorts. Elective units oriented towards practical communication skills (such as including videos of student role plays or inviting parents to attend discussion forums) were reported to be extremely popular, highlighting students' perceived needs for such skills with parents. One teacher educator describes student responses to a unit focusing on interpersonal communication skills:

“They do feel a need and what is really interesting in that subject is that, they are terrified. And they have a lot to overcome, and they really value being put in that vulnerable situation, which of course, is entirely supported, and really transparent, but they really value that experience.”

The responses of students to practically-oriented subjects has resonance with research highlighting the tendency among pre-service teachers to prefer subjects that make

direct links to the application of practical skills (Conle & Sakamoto, 2002). However, the appeal of such units also resonates with findings from the *National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning Project* (Doecke, et al, 2008) highlighting that the majority of teachers see communication with parents and communities as the area in which most professional development is needed.

4. Professional Experience

The Draft National Standards stipulate in their description of standards under ‘Professional Practice’ that ‘Teachers are effective communicators with a repertoire of techniques to engage students, colleagues and parents’; a standard that most teacher educators indicated was addressed within the practicum area of the pre-service program. Interviews indicated significant variability across universities and within programs in the degree to which parent engagement was addressed in the practicum. This was influenced by factors including: time constraints; the stage of the teacher education program during which the practicum takes place; the stage of the school year of the practicum; the length of the practicum; the culture of individual schools; and the views of teacher-mentors regarding parent engagement and its perceived importance as part of the student teacher’s induction. These were seen to be further influenced by the nature of reflection sessions within the teacher education program, and whether/how parent engagement was explicitly raised as an issue within feedback discussions.

In this study, two separate albeit related aspects of students’ professional experience emerged as considerations with regard to learning about parent engagement. The first pertains to the extent to which school placements are able to provide opportunities for students to engage frequently with parents during their professional experience. While some reported highly satisfactory arrangements, in which students regularly have opportunities to meet and interact with parents, a number expressed concern that this is not the case in all schools, meaning that experience of parent-engagement during the practicum can vary widely from student to student:

“It tends to be fairly sporadic, so in some schools it seems as though the students have quite a strong engagement around issues to do with parents. But in other contexts the students basically seem to have had no contact or no experience, so it tends to be very sporadic and very much dependent upon the

focus that the issues given within the individual schools that the students attend on prac. So there seems to be some focus, though I wouldn't say a great deal in some schools, down to no focus."

"In the final prac they're expected to be able to relate to parents and talk to parents and everything, but it's probably not addressed, maybe as much as it should be actually."

This variability raises questions about how beginning teachers are able to document their understanding of parent engagement for the purposes of accreditation, particularly in cases where only minimal opportunities to interact with parents were available. In such cases, examples of evidence of techniques to engage parents took the form of portfolio inclusions such as letters of introduction for parents and excursion notes. Some participants underscored the need for closer integration between practicum content and other units, and emphasized the importance of addressing parent engagement explicitly and consistently both in practicum and reflection:

"You get that reported back to you whenever these topics come back in class, 'On prac you wouldn't believe what my teacher said or my teacher did,' or, 'You wouldn't believe this parent when I was on prac kept calling the staff dah, dah.' But I think that there's not a close engagement between prac activities and units they might do, so an opportunity for them to, for example specifically concentrate and focus on and report back on issues of parent engagement while they're on prac, I've never seen it done."

"I think a closer integration between practicum and all aspects of student and family lives in schooling would be really useful in the sense that I don't think practicums should just be conducted in splendid isolation, sort of tendency of 'I'll go off and write my lesson plan by myself and I'll show it to my master teacher and they'll tell me if it's okay and I'll go into my classroom and I'll implement that myself and I'll see how it goes'. And that, I think, tends to be a lot of what students focus on in pracs, is their own block of lesson plans but I think it would be really useful if a fair amount of time was also spent concentrating on the nature of the whole life and process of schooling for students, and that does include the family. I don't think that there's probably enough time even for it in a school day sometimes, even for regular teachers. I really think a very specific focus would have to be intentionally put on it to direct people's attention to it and make them do it. I think it would be really beneficial."

A second aspect of professional experience that emerged as an area of concern is the view of a number of participants that there can be a disjuncture between what is taught in pre-service programs and what students encounter in schools. As one teacher

educator indicated, graduate teachers are susceptible to a powerful ‘default’ position (Rohr, 2010) operating in some schools that can potentially undermine the ideals of parent engagement with which many graduate teachers begin their careers:

“While they’re doing their teacher education courses they have wonderful ideas about what they’re going to do and when they get out into the schools, the teacher tells them to forget everything that they’ve learnt at university and so they do. I mean that’s still very alive and well. It’s not universal of course, but we still get a lot of students coming back after school saying “My teacher told me what you teach at university is not really – you don’t know what it’s like in the schools” – just the old story but I think there’s also a lot of research that shows that students do...change their ideas while they’re studying but then they revert to them once they get out and they’re employed as a teacher.”

“A lot of mentor teachers are quite negative I find in relation to partnerships – I guess they view parents as peripheral support rather than partners, like doing the reading at night time and providing an environment that fosters literacy.”

The differing nature of pre-service teachers’ encounters not only with parents, but also with more experienced teachers during the practicum, again highlights the complexities involved in ensuring that pre-service teachers are well-equipped with the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for effectively working with parents.

Discussion: overlap, discontinuity and prior experience

Our study revealed considerable variation between teacher education programs in both the extent to which the topic of parent-school engagement is addressed, and the nature of the units, programs and stages of program in which it is addressed. It is worth noting that despite differences of institutional location and geographical distribution, participants in this study expressed similar views pertaining to the need for pre-service teachers to gain a good understanding of parent engagement prior to their entry to the profession. Comments and observations cited in this paper can generally be seen as indicative of findings from the study as a whole. Alongside institutionally specific differences in program design, variations in content are also broadly underpinned by university location and perceived local need. For example, the perceived needs of student cohorts and their likely future schools, are factors that may shape course inclusions. Some participants, for example, observed that factors such as the proportion of off-site students in the cohort, or the proportion of mature

age students in the cohort who may be parents themselves, can make a difference in student uptake of particular topics such as parent-school engagement.

Distinctions between stand-alone units in pre-service programs for early childhood, primary and secondary sectors are difficult given the changing nature of courses and the overlap in many programs between some early childhood, primary and secondary units. However, it is worth noting that early childhood education pays particular attention to valuing, managing and preparing teachers for the relationships between parents and schooling (see, for example, Blasi, 2002; Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Freeman, 2010; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009; McBride, Bae, & Wright, 2002; Prosser, 2009). While our study focused particularly on primary and secondary school teacher preparation, we note that parent engagement appears less consistently in these programs than in early childhood teacher education.

This difference is particularly interesting in light of the general decrease in parent involvement as children progress through schooling (Crozier, 2000; Crozier, 2001; McNamara, Stronach, Rodrigo, Beresford, & Botcherby, 2000; Vincent & Martin, 2002), raising questions regarding whether teacher preparation may be a contributing factor in the decrease of parent involvement over time. This is an important question, given that over half the participants in our study referred to the way parent-school engagement is addressed in their program using terms such as ‘oblique’, ‘inferred’, ‘incidental’, ‘ad hoc’ and ‘added on’. These participants considered that parent engagement was included as an aspect of various units, but not necessarily addressed in an explicit and consistent way. As one teacher educator explained,

“We do cover parents and families but there is nothing that specifically talks about parent involvement. It comes in a variety of ways through the program.”

The main explanation offered by participants for limited inclusion of this topic pertained to constraints such as time pressure associated with a crowded curriculum. Teacher educators also emphasized the usefulness of addressing parent-school engagement toward the end of the program, as pre-service teachers commenced more practical areas of professional preparation.

As noted elsewhere in this article, there was broad consensus among participants that insufficient attention was paid to the more pragmatic aspects of parent-school engagement, particularly given the anxiety that beginning teachers expressed concerning communicating with parents:

“When I hear students talking about their fear of parents and their lack of confidence at actually approaching parents or their lack of skill at actually knowing how to go about it, you know the gap becomes more obvious to me that we just assume that they will learn it by osmosis. And I do think we do need to explicitly teach what other ways you can do this. Perhaps we focus so much on ‘can they teach?’ that we’ve not necessarily thought about those surrounding things that are skilled. And I guess that's becoming increasingly important as well, so it's a matter of catching up - the need is there... because they find it difficult, you know when a parent comes up to them they're sort of saying “I didn't know what to say” or “I didn't know how far to take it” or you know, just that, what's the connection and how do I do it?”

As two others put it:

“I think you have to address it, to make it more visible. I think it's like a little undercurrent, a trickle that comes through but I think it needs to be more upfront, more evident, and I think it needs to be addressed more in the practicum.”

“To be honest, I think that when they are graduating and reflect on their program, generally I would say that my students would comment that they haven't probably been prepared enough to engage with parents and carers and families”.

The degree to which communication with parents is addressed was also seen by participants as being influenced by the importance that individual teacher educators placed on it. Several, for example, discussed drawing from their own experience as school teachers:

“I do a lot of discussing of anecdotal type of stuff from my own experience with the idea of trying to equip the students with some ideas on how to approach relationships with parents and a lot of that is about giving advice on sort of things like acting early, making contact with parents very early in the piece”.

And:

“A lot of the lecturers here have experience as classroom teachers and I think that they’re bringing that in in their own ad hoc way in a sense, not built directly into my units, we always do something on resourcing in the different units and I always introduce it as part of the resources that are available to us”.

Overall, our study showed that despite a commitment on the part of participants to preparing students for engaging effectively with parents, the formal inclusion of parent engagement in pre-service teacher education programs is limited. While parent engagement can and does appear across a number of subjects, overlaps and discontinuities mean that not all pre-service teachers can be guaranteed to have considered this topic sufficiently.

We acknowledge that this study is constrained by several limitations, and therefore provides a general overview, rather than a comprehensive portrait of the ways that parent-school engagement is addressed in all Australian pre-service teacher education programs. Limitations include the evolving nature of university programs, where unit offerings, content and staffing may vary considerably from year to year, or from semester to semester. Factors such as program renewal, accreditation compliance and academic staff areas of research interest and expertise can all contribute to changes in course or unit content, including the range of pedagogic, philosophical or political lenses that shape both content and delivery. It is worth noting that in some universities, pre-service programs were in the process of being rewritten, in most cases in order to satisfy the National Standards criteria coming into effect in 2013.

Conclusions

This study identifies a range of ways that pre-service teacher education students are being prepared for parent engagement, and highlights the need for this important aspect of teachers’ work to receive more careful attention in the pre-service phase of their professional preparation. In particular, while pre-service teachers may engage in formal learning about parent engagement in the four domains that we have identified, the considerable unevenness with which Australian teacher education courses address this topic supports the contentions of others (Jordan, et al, 2002; McConchie, 2004; MacGregor, 2005) that the area is not well-addressed.

We take the view that each of the four domains we have identified has the potential to aid pre-service teachers in developing understandings about the importance of parent engagement, and to explore and reflect upon the practical implications of that knowledge. This is particularly the case in terms of the need for teachers to enter the profession well-equipped with knowledge of what remains an under-theorised area of research and tertiary learning (Daniel, 2011; Jordan, et al, 2002). As our attempt to map the ways that pre-service teachers are being prepared for working with parents highlights, the changeable nature of units within programmatic structures, the potential for topics to be included in elective rather than foundational or required units, as well as the potential for topics to be emphasized or omitted from semester to semester and from lecturer to lecturer depending on a range of variables, together mean that tracking the topic across the sector can only be done in a general way. This in turn has implications for how and whether this particular aspect of the national teaching standards are being sufficiently addressed at any given point in time. This is something with which our participants overwhelmingly agreed – that the issue of parent engagement appears in teacher education programs in an ad hoc way, to such an extent that a comprehensively accurate mapping of how it is addressed is simply not possible. We see the combination of sporadic approaches, the relegation of the topic in some courses to minimal coverage in a single subject or to elective subjects, and the often ad-hoc (and in some cases non-existent) experiences with parents during practicum as problematic given that overwhelming majority of teachers – some 82% (Doecke, et al, 2008) – consider themselves poorly prepared for this particular aspect of their work.

It remains unclear how greater consistency can be achieved across cohorts and across the sector more broadly, whilst still ensuring that units and programs lose none of their richness and uniqueness of approach. Further, each of the four domains identified in this study is informed by the others, suggesting that despite the challenges posed by potential gaps and inconsistencies, there may nonetheless be benefits of non-unitary approaches to preparing pre-service teachers for the multiple dimensions of family-school relations (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). That notwithstanding, the limited inclusion of this topic in some programs, and the potential for some teachers to enter their profession insufficiently prepared for parent engagement warrants urgent attention.

The interview data from our study also indicates a widespread commitment among individual teacher educators to the importance of parent-school engagement, and to supporting their students to learn about, prepare for and reflect upon their future relationships with parents of the children they teach. The teacher educators we interviewed were keenly aware of the personal, professional and institutional complexities of navigating relationships between schools, parents and communities. Further, they highlighted concerns regarding perceived gaps between parent engagement as a policy ideal and the negativity toward parents that their students at times encounter in schools. Participants acknowledged that although effective family-school partnerships are essential to learners' educational outcomes and are gaining increased attention in policy debate, attending to this issue with consistency in pre-service programs has been slow to follow.

This study calls for further research into the ways that parent engagement in pre-service programs is perceived and experienced by pre-service, beginning and novice teachers. More needs to be known about the ways in which these groups make connections between dispersed, albeit interconnected, formal and informal learning, and the knowledge and experience they take with them into the teaching profession. Further examination of this important aspect of teacher's professional lives, we would argue, will be essential to achieving a greater consistency in preparing the future teaching workforce for engaging effectively with parents.

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