

School–Family Partnership Procedures in Urban Secondary Education, Part B: Implementing and Testing Alternative Procedures

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Abstract

Particularly in urban schools, school–family partnerships can contribute to a student’s academic achievement and reduce educational disadvantage, regardless of the family’s socioeconomic background. Based on the recommendations of a former explorative field study (also published in this issue), conventional school–family partnership procedures were transformed to the following alternative partnership procedures: individual introductory conferences at school, home visits, alternative individual parent–teacher conferences, and alternative collective parent meetings. In this correlational study, parents at 10 secondary schools in the Netherlands where these interventions were implemented completed questionnaires. This article examines if parents who participated in one of the alternative school–family partnership procedures (the interventions) scored significantly better on three key topics compared to parents who attended a control activity: achieving a positive relationship between school and parents, positioning the student in school–family partnerships, and facilitating parents to support and guide their child at home. Significant positive relationships were found between the key topics and most of the interventions. Of the four, the individual introductory conferences explained the largest proportions of variance. The results give direction for further improvement of parental involvement in urban secondary education and can be used to develop a more coherent approach to improved school–family partnership procedures.

Key Words: school–family partnerships, parental involvement programs, educational disadvantage, secondary schools, the Netherlands, parent–teacher–student conferences, parent meetings, urban schools, communication

Introduction

The literature review (see Lusse, Notten, & Engbersen, 2019) shows that school–family partnerships may contribute to improving a student’s academic achievement and to reducing educational disadvantages (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Higgins, Kokotsaki, & Coe, 2012; OECD, 2012). Particularly at urban schools,¹ school–family partnership procedures must be designed carefully, because students with a low socioeconomic background and a low parental educational level (Lusse, 2013) are most at risk of lack of school success. This is even more relevant in the lowest levels of urban secondary education² (WRR, 2009), such as preparatory–vocational (prevocational) education and education for students with learning disabilities.³ In the Netherlands, schools for these two types of education offer four years of secondary education to students aged 12 to 16, Grades 7–10.

Research clearly demonstrates the positive effect of parental involvement at home on students’ academic achievement (Bakker, Denessen, Dennissen, & Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2013; Castro et al., 2015; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). This parental involvement includes pedagogical support (encouraging and having confidence in the child), educational support (having high expectations and showing an interest in the child’s school experiences and learning), and support in educational choices (being a sounding board for the choices the child makes in a school career; Lusse, 2016). Research also highlights a smaller, but nevertheless clear effect of parent–teacher cooperation (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012). Parent–teacher cooperation is defined as parents and teachers exchanging information about the development of the student both at school and at home, aligning their support and guidance, and facilitating each other to be able to offer this support to the student (Lusse et al., 2019). This parent–teacher cooperation is comparable with Type 2 (communication) of Epstein’s framework of six types of involvement (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Associates, 2009). The effect of parental involvement at home matters regardless of the socioeconomic background of the parents. Although parental self-efficacy for helping their child succeed in school is important for parents to become involved in their child’s learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005), less educated parents can be unsure in fulfilling this role, which may result in a lower quality of parental support

(Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Schools may increase this quality by facilitating parents in their role (Lusse, 2016). Unfortunately, particularly in urban contexts, barriers between school and home may hinder parents from visiting their child's school. As a result, teachers could believe these parents are absent in their child's school life (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011) and experience difficulties in cooperating with these parents and in facilitating them to support their child at home. Positive relationships are strengthened when parents have confidence in their child's teacher, feel welcome and are clearly invited by school staff, and experience reciprocity in their communication with the school (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Davies, Ryan, & Tarr, 2011; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Especially in urban schools, students may bridge the gap between school and home (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) and help parents to be involved in their school life at home (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). However, the student's role in school-parent contact is often unclear in practice (Lusse, 2013, 2016). Based on the literature review, we focus on three key issues in urban school-family partnerships: (a) achieving a positive relationship between the school and parents, (b) positioning the student in school-family partnerships, and (c) facilitating parents to support and guide their child at home.

Alternative School-Family Partnership Procedures (Interventions)

In an explorative field study (Lusse et al., 2019), we examined to what extent conventional school-family partnership procedures at four schools for prevocational education contributed to three key topics of school-family partnership (achieving a positive relationship, positioning the student, facilitating parents). We examined four procedures of parent-teacher cooperation. Two of these procedures, the conventional individual parent-teacher conference and the conventional collective parent meeting, were offered at all four schools and in all grades. The other two procedures, the one-to-one home visits and the collective career fair, were rarely offered and only in some grades at the two schools that were selected for their good practices in school-family partnership. The study was conducted in Rotterdam, which has the highest number of children with educational disadvantages in the Netherlands (Entzinger & Scheffer, 2012).

Results of this former study (Lusse et al., 2019) included:

- Although the teachers were aware of the importance of developing positive relationships with parents (as discussed in the literature), there was little opportunity to do so at the conventional individual parent-teacher

conferences or at the conventional collective parent meetings. During most parent–teacher contacts, the teacher did most of the talking and there was little reciprocity. The school staff were often not aware that many of the partnership procedures were poorly organized and thus made parents feel less welcome. Although home visits offered the teacher a positive starting point for a relationship with parents, schools were reluctant to arrange these procedures because of lack of time or resistance to intrude in the privacy of families. The career fair offered a more reciprocal alternative for the traditional collective parent meetings.

- Although the teachers were aware of the importance of the students' role in school–family partnership (as discussed in the literature), in practice, the schools did not seem to have a clear policy regarding the presence and role of the student in school–family partnership procedures. Teachers often focused on the negative aspects of the students' performance and behavior, which led to a more controlling attitude of the parents rather than to an encouraging attitude. This did not stimulate students to invite their parents into their school life or to an effective strategy for parents to support their child at home.
- The literature emphasizes the importance of parental involvement at home and the risk of a lack of the quality of this involvement when low educated parents are unsure of fulfilling this role. However, the schools in the study seldom facilitated parents in guiding their child at home. Teachers did not clearly communicate their expectations of how parents should support their child with schoolwork and seldom involved parents in their child's educational choices. Teachers often focused on the negative aspects of students' performance or behavior, which stimulated parental control rather than encouragement. Furthermore, parents often had difficulty understanding the information given by the school. During the career fair, teachers were more supportive to parents and students and were actively interacting with them.

We transformed the conventional procedures (individual parent–teacher conferences, conventional collective parent meetings, home visits, career fair) to four alternative school–family partnership procedures. In each of these procedures, all students and parents were invited, students had a clear position, parents and students played an active part in the reciprocal conversation (trilogues), and attention was focused on the development and guidance of the student both at school and at home (see Lusse et al., 2019):

1a. *Individual introductory conferences*: Parent–teacher introductory conferences at school with the teacher, parent(s), and student, offered to all parents and students early in the school year. The purpose of these conferences is to

facilitate teachers and parents to get to know each other; to exchange expectations; to learn about the students' talents, interests, and background; and to make agreements about the guidance of the student and about school–parent communication during the school year. These conferences are an alternative for schools that are reluctant to arrange home visits (see 1b).

1b. *Home visits*: Individual conferences with the teacher(s), parent(s), and student at the student's home. Home visits have the same purpose as introductory meetings at school (see 1a). Home visits also offer teachers the possibility to get to know the student's home environment.

2. *Alternative individual parent–teacher conferences*: Individual conferences with the teacher, parent(s), and student several times during the school year. The purpose of these conferences is to exchange information about the student's development and to facilitate and align teacher–parent support. Teacher, parent(s), and student discuss the successes, ambitions, and educational choices of the student and address any disappointments and points for development.

3. *Alternative collective parent meetings*: Active and reciprocal collective parent meetings at school. The purpose of these interactive meetings is to enable parents and students to experience aspects of the program, educational choices, projects, and special issues. Examples of alternative collective parent meetings include student presentations to parents, a fair, or tasks that students and parents do together.

As a part of a National Community Rehabilitation Program, we implemented these alternative school–family partnership procedures at eight schools for prevocational secondary education and at four schools for students with learning disabilities in the southern part of Rotterdam, which is the most disadvantaged area of this city (Entzinger & Scheffer, 2012).² Our aim was to investigate whether these alternative procedures (the interventions) contributed to the three key topics of school–family partnership (the dependent variables): achieving a positive relationship, positioning the student in this relationship, and facilitating parents to support their child. The study aims to answer the following research question: Do parents who participated in one of the alternative school–family partnership procedures (the interventions) score significantly better on the following three topics compared to parents who attended a control activity:

- a. Achieving a positive relationship between school and parents,
- b. Positioning the student in the school–family partnerships, and
- c. Facilitating parents to support and guide their child at home?

Method

Design

Secondary schools in the southern part of Rotterdam were asked to choose and implement one of these alternative school–family partnership procedures: individual introductory conferences, home visits, alternative individual parent–teacher conferences, or alternative collective parent meetings. Trained facilitators helped the schools to implement the procedure(s). Parent questionnaires with items about the three key topics (achieving a positive relationship, positioning the student in this relationship, facilitating parents to support their child) were administered.⁴ Teachers registered the attendance rate of the parents at the procedures to measure parent participation. As an indication of effect, we compared the parents' answers at the schools that had implemented an intervention to those of the schools in the control group that had organized conventional parent–teacher conferences. Since this study used a posttest only design with nonequivalent groups, we cannot claim causal relations.

Instruments

We designed a questionnaire to measure parents' perceptions of the alternative school–family partnership procedures (i.e., the interventions). The questionnaires contained 14 items about parents' perception of the contribution of the intervention to the three key topics:

- a. Achieving a positive relationship between school and parents (five items, e.g., *I trust my child's teacher; The atmosphere at school is pleasant*).
- b. Positioning the student in the family–school partnerships (four items, e.g., *My child appreciates my help with his/her school life; My child appreciates my presence at his/her school*).
- c. Facilitating parent's guidance of their child at home (five items, e.g., *The school gives me practical suggestions about how to support my child at home; The school offers good support in my child's educational choices*).

All items were measured on Likert scales with five options varying from (1) *do not agree at all* to (5) *totally agree*. The questionnaire also included the following items about the respondents' background:

- Educational level: high level of education (graduated from university or university of applied sciences); average level of education (completed preparatory university or senior secondary [vocational] education); low level of education (completed prevocational or primary education or no formal education).
- Ethnic background: the mother of the respondent was born in the Netherlands, Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, or another country.

- Student's year in education: Grade 7, 8, 9, or 10.
- Relation to the student: father, mother, or other family member.
- The type of school: school for prevocational education or school for children with learning disabilities.

As some parents were not proficient in the Dutch language and could have problems in understanding the questions, trained interviewers (some of them bilingual) filled out the questionnaire with the parents immediately after the school–family partnership procedure. We approached all parents who left the classroom after the individual intervention or control activity. Almost all parents were willing to complete the questionnaire. During the alternative collective parent meetings, we also handed out the questionnaires to parents who were leaving the classroom and helped them to fill them out. Although this did not result in a random sample, we succeeded in including parents with a low educational background and with diverse ethnic backgrounds (see Table 3).

Respondents

A total of 16 schools participated in this study in some capacity—12 schools for prevocational education and 4 secondary schools for students with learning disabilities. Of these, 11 schools chose one of the interventions to replace one of the conventional school–family partnership procedures, and one school (School 8) implemented two interventions. Four schools (Control Schools 1 to 4) did not implement any of the interventions but participated as control schools (see Table 1).

Five schools (Schools 1 to 5) chose the individual introductory conferences and implemented them as planned. Three schools (Schools 6 to 8) implemented the alternative individual parent–teacher conferences. Two schools (Schools 8 and 9) implemented the alternative collective parent meeting. Three schools (Schools 10 to 12) chose the home visits. Unfortunately, the home visits were only implemented in one class of Grade 7 at School 10. Only 6 of the 10 parents of students in this small class completed a questionnaire. At School 11, only a few home visits took place because most teachers thought it was too time consuming, and no questionnaires were administered. Although the teachers at School 12 were positive about home visits, they were not able to implement this intervention in time for it to be included in the study. We therefore excluded home visits from the analysis and removed Schools 10, 11, and 12 from the sample.

Table 1. Background Information and Chosen Interventions of the Participating Schools

| School | Type | PPA Score | Chosen Intervention | Performed Intervention |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|
| <i>School 1</i> | Prevocational | 95.9 | Individual introductory conference | As planned |
| <i>School 2</i> | Prevocational | 97.1 | Individual introductory conference | As planned |
| <i>School 3</i> | Prevocational | 94.0 | Individual introductory conference | As planned |
| <i>School 4</i> | Prevocational | 97.3 | Individual introductory conference | As planned |
| <i>School 5</i> | Learning disabilities | unknown | Individual introductory conference | As planned |
| <i>School 6</i> | Prevocational | 57.6 | Alt. individual parent-teacher conference | As planned |
| <i>School 7</i> | Learning disabilities | 92.9 | Alt. individual parent-teacher conference | As planned |
| <i>School 8*</i> | Prevocational | 93.9 | Alt. individual parent-teacher conference | As planned |
| <i>School 8*</i> | Prevocational | 93.9 | Alt. collective parent meeting | As planned |
| <i>School 9</i> | Prevocational | 96.2 | Alt. collective parent meeting | As planned |
| <i>School 10</i> | Learning disabilities | unknown | Home visit | As planned, not enough data |
| <i>School 11</i> | Learning disabilities | 93.6 | Home visit | Rarely implemented, no data |
| <i>School 12</i> | Prevocational | 96.0 | Home visit | Not implemented, no data for analyses |
| <i>Control School 1</i> | Prevocational | 95.8 | None (control activity) | |
| <i>Control School 2</i> | Prevocational | 92.7 | None (control activity) | |
| <i>Control School 3</i> | Prevocational | 97.3 | None (control activity) | |
| <i>Control School 4</i> | Prevocational | 87.5 | None (control activity) | |

Notes. *School 8 implemented two interventions

Alt. = Alternative; PPA = Poverty Problem Accumulation

All participating schools had a population of students with diverse ethnic backgrounds. To establish the socioeconomic background of the parents we used the Poverty Problem Accumulation scores of the schools (PPA or APC scores in the Netherlands). This is a standardized score to establish the percentage of students living in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods based on the postal codes of the students. The PPA scores ranged from 0% (no students live in disadvantaged neighborhoods) to 100% (all students live in disadvantaged neighborhoods). Seven of the nine remaining schools that implemented an intervention had high PPA scores, indicating that almost all students (from 93%–98%) lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods. At one school, 57% of the students lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Due to differences in registration, we were unable to obtain reliable PPA scores at two of the schools for students with learning disabilities. At the four schools for prevocational education which participated as control schools, the PPA scores were high (88%–97% of the students lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods). Table 1 gives an overview of the participating schools (both intervention and control schools), the average PPA scores of the students at these schools, and the interventions chosen by the schools.

Since we excluded the schools who had chosen to implement the home visits from the analyses, only 13 schools remained in the study. Questionnaires were completed with parents at the nine schools which had implemented an intervention (200 parents) and at the four control schools that had a conventional individual parent–teacher conference (76 parents). Table 2 shows the spread of the parents, classes, and schools over the interventions and the control activity.

We interviewed parents with diverse ethnic backgrounds and educational levels. We spoke to more mothers (62%) than fathers (14%) and to more parents of students in Grades 7 and 8 (71%) than in Grades 9 and 10 (25%). Table 3 shows the backgrounds of the respondents.

Table 2. Participation of Parents, Classes, and Schools in the Interventions and Control Activity

| | Parents | | Classes | | Schools | |
|--|----------|-----|----------|-----|----------|-----|
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| <i>Interventions</i> | | | | | | |
| Individual Introductory Conferences | 86 | 31 | 15 | 20 | 5 | 36 |
| Alternative Individual Parent–Teacher Conferences | 59 | 21 | 24 | 32 | 3 | 21 |
| Alternative Collective Parent Meetings | 55 | 20 | 13* | 7 | 2 | 14 |
| <i>Control Activity</i> | | | | | | |
| Conventional Individual Parent–Teacher Conferences | 76 | 28 | 31 | 41 | 4 | 29 |
| Total | 276 | 100 | 75 | 100 | 13** | 100 |

*Two schools participated in this intervention. At the first school, 5 classes participated. We failed to distinguish the participating classes at the second school, but we estimated that parents of about 8 classes completed questionnaires at this school, for an estimated total of 13.

**School 8 implemented two interventions, so 13 schools participated instead of 14.

Table 3. Background of the Respondents

| Item | Parents (<i>N</i> = 282) |
|-------------------------|---|
| Grade of Student | 42% Grade 7 29% Grade 8 21% Grade 9 4% Grade 10 4% Unknown |
| Relationship to Student | 62% Mother 14% Father 13% Mother + Father 4% Family Member 8% Unknown |
| Educational Level | 8% High 46% Average 37% Low 9% Unknown |
| Ethnic Background | 25% The Netherlands 30% Turkey/Morocco 26% Suriname/Antilles 16% Other 3% Unknown |

We registered the attendance figures (the percentage of students in each class of whom one or both parents or another adult caretaker was present at the intervention or control activity) of 57 classes at 11 of the schools (the nine schools that implemented an intervention and Control Schools 2 and 3). We collected these attendance figures immediately after each school–family partnership procedure took place and emailed the teachers we could not reach. The average parent attendance rate was 85%. Schools managed especially well to reach out to parents of students during individual procedures in Grades 7 and 8. This holds true for both the interventions as well as the control activity (the conventional individual parent–teacher conference). The average attendance at individual procedures was 88%. The overall attendance at individual procedures in Grades 7 and 8 was 97% and varied from 91%–100%. In Grades 9 and 10, the attendance rate at individual procedures was 73% and varied from 21%–100%. The average parental attendance at alternative collective parent meetings was 69%. This attendance rate varied at the two schools which implemented this intervention. At one school, the average attendance was 92% and varied from 88%–93%. At the other school, the average was 46% and varied from 6%–73%. Table 4 gives an overview of the attendance rates.

Table 4. Attendance Rates at the School–Family Partnership Procedures

| Procedure | Parent Attendance Grades 7 and 8 | Parent Attendance Grades 9 and 10 |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Intervention</i> | | |
| Individual introductory conferences | 97% (13 classes at 5 schools) | 45% (2 classes at 1 school) |
| Alternative individual parent–teacher conferences | 97% (5 classes at 3 schools) | 63% (5 classes at 2 schools) |
| Alternative collective parent meetings | 69% (10 classes at 2 schools) | |
| <i>Control activity</i> | | |
| Conventional individual parent–teacher conferences | 98% (10 classes at 2 schools) | 83% (11 classes at 2 schools) |

Analyses

To verify the validity of the measurements of our three dependent variables (achieving a positive relationship with parents, positioning the student in this relationship, facilitating parents in supporting their child), we conducted confirmatory factor analyses on item scores with Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2004). The fit of the three-factor model with the factors *Relationship*, *Positioning*, and *Facilitation* was established. We used the following fit indices to

evaluate model fit: χ^2 , the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR). The χ^2 -test was used to test the exact fit of the model. Since χ^2 is a very strict measure for social science research and sensitive to sample size (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996), a significant χ^2 does not imply misfit. To conclude that the model shows a reasonable fit, CFI and TLI should be above .9, and SRMR should not exceed .08. Values of RMSEA below .05 are indicative of “close fit,” values between .05 and .08 are indicative of “fair fit,” values between .08 and .10 are indicative of “mediocre fit,” and values larger than .10 are indicative of “misfit” (Bentler, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacCallum et al., 1996). We also checked whether the three-factor model fit significantly better than a one-factor model. The significance of the difference in fit of both nested models was established by means of the difference in χ^2 of both models. This difference forms a new χ^2 with a number of degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the degrees of freedom of both models.

The three-factor model showed a fair fit ($\chi^2 = 198.850$, $df = 74$, $p < 0.001$; TLI = 0.875; CFI = 0.899; SRMR = 0.056; RMSEA = .077) and all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$). The correlations (and standard errors) between the latent factors were: Positioning*Facilitation = .738 (.051); Relationship*Facilitation = .809 (.041); Relationship*Positioning = .834 (.047). The three-factor model fitted significantly better than the one-factor model for all 14 items ($\Delta = 57.283$; $df = 3$; $p < .001$).⁵ Having three factors and four to five indicators per factor, standardized factor loadings ranging from .358 and .824, and correlations between factors varying between .738 and .834 (in a sample of 289 cases) results in an adequate power (Wolf, Harrington, Clark, & Miller, 2013) for rejecting model fit. We therefore concluded that the results of the confirmatory factor analyses support the validity of the three dependent variables.

The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was computed for each of the three sums of the items measuring the three key topics. Respondents with missing values for one or more items were excluded. For research into relations between constructs at group level, Cronbach's alpha should be at least .60 (Field, 2009) or .70 (Bryman, 2015). All three Cronbach's alphas were sufficient (*Relationship* = .75, *Facilitation* = .73, *Positioning* = .66; see Table 5). The mean of each sum score was close to four (on a five-point scale), which means that, on average, parents agreed with the items (see Table 5).

To answer our research question, we conducted multilevel regression analysis using MLwiN (Rasbash et al., 2000). Random intercepts at class level or school level were added when these resulted in significantly better model fit. The three dependent variables are the sum scores (relationship, positioning,

facilitation). The independent variables are the dummy variables indicating whether the respondents participated in a specific intervention. We tested model fit improvement after adding random intercepts at class level or school level to the model by subtracting the deviances of the nested models. The differences in deviance between nested models have a chi-square distribution with a number of degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the number of parameters estimated in both models.⁶ We calculated the effects of the interventions by comparing nested regression models: one without and one with the dummies indicating the intervention. Thus, we could calculate the percentages of explained variance by the interventions at all variance levels in the model. Per sum, the differences in mean scores between groups attending interventions and the control group were estimated twice: once with and once without correcting for significant covariates because it is uncertain whether correcting for covariates gives a more valid indication of the effects of the interventions or whether the correction leads to spuriously diminishing estimated effects. The following covariates were used: educational level or ethnic background of the respondent, student age, or the type of school (prevocational education or for students with learning disabilities). Significance of regression coefficients was calculated by a Wald test.⁷

Table 5. Overview of Cronbach's Alphas and Sum Scores of the Three Factors (SD = standard deviation, in parentheses)

| Factor | <i>N</i> Parents | Cronbach's Alpha | Sum Scores |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Relationship (5 items) | 236 | .75 | mean 4.18 (SD = .47) |
| Positioning (4 items) | 281 | .66 | mean 4.10 (SD = .52) |
| Facilitation (5 items) | 259 | .73 | mean 3.98 (SD = .53) |

Results

Relationship (Research Question 1a)

In the analyses with *Relationship* as dependent variable, adding a class level to the model significantly improved model fit ($\Delta = 1.044$; $df = 1$; $p = n.s.$; $N_{parents} = 174$; $N_{class} = 71$; $N_{school} = 12$). Adding a school level also significantly improved model fit ($\Delta = 16.132$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$) and reduced class level variance to zero (.000; $se = .000$). Removing class level, leaving only student level and school level, did not result in a significant model fit deterioration ($\Delta = .000$; $df = 1$; $p = n.s.$). Analyses were therefore conducted with a random intercept at parent level and at school level. Deleting class level also resulted in a larger sample ($N_{parents} = 226$), since the class code contained relatively many missing values.

Parents who were present at the individual introductory conference or at the alternative individual parent–teacher conference (interventions) scored significantly higher on the factor *Relationship* than parents who attended the conventional individual parent–teacher conference (control activity). No significant differences were found between the mean scores of parents attending the traditional parent–teacher conference (control activity) and the alternative collective parent meeting (see Table 6, models 1 and 2). The intervention dummies explained 1% of respondent variance, 81.3% of school level variance (difference between school means), and 12.4% of total variance in relationship scores.

The covariates educational level and ethnic background of the parents significantly predicted *Relationship* when regressed separately on *Relationship*. While these covariates were measured at nominal measurement level, they were represented by dummies. The regression analyses were repeated after correcting for these two covariates. After correcting for the covariates (see Table 6, models 3 and 4), parents who were present at the individual introductory conference (intervention) scored significantly higher than parents who attended the conventional individual parent–teacher conference (control activity) on the factor *Relationship*. However, parents who attended the alternative individual parent–teacher conference no longer scored significantly higher than parents who were present at the conventional individual parent–teacher conference. As in the analysis without covariates, again no differences were found on *Relationship* between parents who attended the alternative collective parent meeting and parents in the control group. After correcting for covariates, the intervention dummies explained 0.6% of respondent variance, 85% of school level variance, and 9.6% of total variance in relationship scores.

To summarize the results of *Relationship*: Analyses were conducted with and without correcting for educational level and ethnic background of the parents. In the analyses without correcting for covariates, parents who attended the individual introductory meeting or the alternative individual parent–teacher conferences (interventions) scored significantly higher on *Relationship* than parents who attended the control activity. In the analyses with covariates, only parents who attended an individual introductory meeting scored significantly higher than parents in the control condition. More than 80% of school variance (and with correction for the relevant covariates over 85%) can be explained by the school–family partnership procedure implemented at the schools.

TESTING PARTNERSHIP PROCEDURES

Table 6. Results of Multilevel Analyses with Dependent Variable *Relationship* (SE = standard error, in parentheses).

| Model | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|--|----------------|--|----------------|
| Fixed Part | <i>N</i> parents = 226; <i>N</i> schools = 12 | | <i>N</i> parents = 201; <i>N</i> schools = 12 | |
| Intercept | 4.191 (.060) | 3.987 (.064) | 4.405 (.120) | 4.257 (.125) |
| <i>Interventions:</i> Reference group = Conventional individual parent-teacher conferences | | | | |
| Individual introductory conferences | | .389*** (.088) | | .316*** (.081) |
| Alt. individual parent-teacher conferences | | .165# (.097) | | .112 (.090) |
| Alt. collective parent meetings | | .260 (.173) | | .253 (.161) |
| Covariates | | | | |
| <i>Educational level:</i> Reference group = university | | | | |
| General secondary education | | | .088 (.143) | .052 (.143) |
| Senior vocational education | | | -.082 (.112) | -.084 (.111) |
| Prevocational education | | | .037 (.118) | .015 (.117) |
| Primary education | | | -.044 (.153) | -.038 (.150) |
| No formal education | | | -.522** (.166) | -.490** (.165) |
| <i>Ethnic group:</i> Reference group = Dutch | | | | |
| Turkish | | | -.221 (.094) | -.244** (.092) |
| Moroccan | | | -.230 (.108) | -.204# (.107) |
| Surinamese | | | -.219 (.096) | -.253** (.093) |
| Antillean | | | -.161 (.115) | -.178 (.113) |
| Cape Verdean | | | -.124 (.158) | -.075 (.154) |
| Other | | | -.324 (.106) | -.314** (.105) |
| Random Part | | | | |
| Respondent variance | .193 (.019) | .191 (.018) | .167 (.017) | .166 (.017) |

Table 6 continued next page

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| | | | | |
|---|-------------|---|-------------|--|
| School variance | .032 (.018) | .006 (.007) | .020 (.012) | .003 (.005) |
| Total variance | .225 | .197 | .187 | .169 |
| % explained respondent variance | | 1.04 | | .60 |
| % explained school variance | | 81.25 | | 85.00 |
| % explained total variance | | 12.44 | | 9.63 |
| Deviance | 286.217 | 273.279 | 223.967 | 212.460 |
| Reference model | | 1 | | 3 |
| Fit improvement after adding intervention dummies | | $\chi^2 = 12.938$ df = 3 $p < .005$ | | $\chi^2 = 11.507$ df = 3 $p < .01$ |

#=sig at 10% (=5% one sided); *sig. at 5%; **sig. at 1%; ***sig. at 0.1%. Alt. = Alternative.

Positioning (Research Question 1b)

In the analyses with *Positioning* as dependent variable, adding a class level to the model significantly improved model fit ($\Delta = 5.001$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Adding a school level did not significantly improve model fit ($\Delta = 0.000$; $df = 1$; n.s.). Analyses were therefore conducted with a parent level and a class level. Unfortunately, since the class code contained relatively many missing values, the consequence of maintaining the class level is a smaller sample.

Parents who attended the individual introductory conferences (intervention) scored significantly higher than parents who attended the conventional individual parent–teacher conferences (control activity) on the factor *Positioning*. No significant differences were found between the mean scores of parents attending the alternative parent–teacher conferences or the alternative collective parent meetings (see Table 7, models 1 and 2). However, adding the three intervention dummies did not lead to a significant model fit improvement. Therefore, the aforementioned significant effect should be interpreted cautiously.

The intervention dummies explained 1.9% of respondent variance, 14.3% of class level variance, and 4% of total variance. None of the covariates showed a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Therefore, no analyses including covariates were conducted for *Positioning* (see Table 7).

To summarize the results of *Positioning*: Parents who attended the individual introductory conferences (intervention) scored significantly higher than parents who attended the conventional individual parent–teacher conferences (control activity). Approximately 14% of class level variance can be explained by the school–family partnership procedure implemented at the schools.

Table 7. Results of Multilevel Analyses with Dependent Variable *Positioning* (SE in parentheses).

| Model | 1 | 2 |
|---|------------------------|--|
| Fixed Part | <i>N</i> = 12; 71; 180 | |
| Intercept | 4.104 (.045) | 3.989 (.073) |
| <i>Interventions:</i> Reference group = Conventional individual parent–teacher conferences | | |
| Individual introductory conferences | | .236* (.105) |
| Alternative individual parent–teacher conferences | | .091 (.112) |
| Alternative collective parent meetings | | .247 (.187) |
| Random Part | | |
| Respondent variance | .211 (.027) | .207 (.026) |
| Class variance | .042 (.023) | .036 (.022) |
| Total variance | .253 | .243 |
| % explained respondent variance | | 1.90 |
| % explained class variance | | 14.29 |
| % explained total variance | | 3.95 |
| Deviance | 256.965 | 251.385 |
| Reference model | | 1 |
| Fit improvement after adding intervention dummies | | $\chi^2 = 5.580$ df = 3 <i>p</i> = n.s |

#=sig at 10% (=5% one sided); *sig. at 5%; **sig. at 1%; ***sig. at 0.1%.

Facilitation (Research Question 1c)

In the analyses with *Facilitation* as dependent variable, adding a random intercept at class level significantly improved model fit ($\Delta = 2.782$; df = 1; *p* < .10; *N* = 171/71/13). Adding a random intercept at school level did not improve model fit ($\Delta = 2.019$; df = 1; *p* = n.s.) but reduced class level variance to practically zero (.008; se = .021). Removing the class level, leaving only a parent and a school level, did not result in significant model fit deterioration ($\Delta = .146$; df = 1; *p* = n.s.). Since the model with a random intercept at school level showed a smaller deviance than the model with a random intercept at class level, analyses were conducted with a parent level and a school level. Again, since we did not need a class level, we used a larger sample. Adding a school level to the respondent level in this larger sample also significantly improved model fit ($\Delta = 18.230$; df = 1; *p* < .001; *N* = 247/12).

The results presented in Table 8 show that parents who attended the individual introductory conferences or the alternative collective parent meetings

(interventions) scored significantly higher on *Facilitation* than parents who attended the conventional parent–teacher conferences (control activity). Parents who attended alternative individual parent–teacher conferences did not score significantly different from parents in the control setting. The interventions explained 1% of respondent variance, 14% of school level variance, and 3% of total variance in facilitation scores. None of the covariates showed a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Therefore, Table 8 only shows the results without covariates.

To summarize the results of *Facilitation*: Parents who attended individual introductory conferences or the alternative collective parent meetings (interventions) scored significantly higher on *Facilitation* than parents who were present at the control activity. Approximately 48% of school variance can be explained by the school–family partnership procedure implemented at the respective schools.

Table 8. Results of Multilevel Analyses with Dependent Variable “Facilitation” (SE in parentheses).

| Model | 1 | 2 |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
| Fixed Part | N parents = 247; N schools = 12 | |
| Intercept | 3.980 (.059) | 3.806 (.086) |
| <i>Interventions:</i> Reference group = Conventional individual parent–teacher conferences | | |
| Individual introductory meeting | | .286* (.119) |
| Alternative individual parent–teacher conferences | | .133 (.128) |
| Alternative parent meetings | | .348* (.140) |
| Random Part | | |
| Respondent variance | .242 (.022) | .240 (.022) |
| School variance | .031 (.018) | .016 (.012) |
| Total variance | .273 | .256 |
| % explained respondent variance | | 0.83 |
| % explained school variance | | 48.39 |
| % explained total variance | | 6.23 |
| Deviance | 366.038 | 358.441 |
| Reference model | | 1 |
| Fit improvement after adding intervention dummies | | $\chi^2 = 7.597$ df = 3 $p < .10$ |

#=sig at 10% (=5% one sided); *sig. at 5%; **sig. at 1%; ***sig. at 0.1%.

Conclusions and Discussion

We found significant positive regression coefficients especially with the individual introductory conferences. Some positive regression coefficients were found with the alternative individual parent–teacher conferences and the alternative collective parent meetings. The majority of school or class level variance was explained for the factors *Relationship* and *Facilitation*. Table 9 summarizes the results of the multilevel regression analyses.

Table 9. Summary of the Results of the Multilevel Regression Analyses (reference group = the conventional meeting to discuss achievement)

| Factor (Intervention) | Relationship | Positioning | Facilitation |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Individual Introductory Conferences | ***with and without covariates | * | * |
| Alternative Individual Parent–Teacher Conferences | #without covariates | | |
| Alternative Collective Parent Meetings | | | * |

#=sig at 10% (=5% one sided); *=sig. at 5%; ** sig. at 1%; ***=sig. at 0.1%.

The results of this study suggest that the individual introductory conferences, with positive regression coefficients for all three factors, contribute to improving school–family partnerships. The five schools which implemented the individual introductory conferences were deliberate about meeting all parents early in the school year and reported more positive relationships with parents at the end of the school year. These five schools all adopted individual introductory conferences as a regular procedure to be used in the future. These conferences are meant to be “getting to know you” encounters (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) as the starting point of the “joining process” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and are in line with Matuszny, Banda, and Coleman (2007) who suggested that parents should be encouraged to engage in two-way, proactive, and positive communication at an early stage. Replacing traditional collective introductory meetings with the individual introductory meetings is in line with Deslandes and Bertrand’s (2005) suggestion to give priority to individual contact between parent and teacher to develop a relationship.

We only found a significant positive regression coefficient (and only at 5% one-sided) for *Relationship* for the alternative individual parent–teacher conferences. These conferences appeared to be difficult for teachers to implement as intended. The schools did invite all students with their parents (instead of only the parents of students with poor grades or performance, and without

the student) and paid more attention to students' successes. However, we observed that teachers still did most of the talking and were reluctant to discuss the child's development and guidance at home. They also found it difficult to apply Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) suggestion to address the role of the student in the conversation and to engage in a two-way process of exchanging information (Davies et al., 2011). In a later study (Kuijpers, Strijk, Lusse, & van Schie, 2018), teachers, parents, and students were found to be more accustomed to this procedure and reacted positively to it.

We only found a significant positive regression coefficient between *Facilitation* and the alternative collective parent meetings. The interactivity and the organization of the procedure were points of attention. Perhaps teachers need more time, training, and practice to transform the conventional procedures into the alternative ones. In a study conducted more recently (Kuijpers et al., 2018), schools seemed to be more creative in utilizing alternative formats (such as the "museum" format suggested by Murray et al., 2014) and in finding ways to stimulate parent–student interaction.

A noticeable result in the current study is that covariates (educational level and ethnic group) only significantly predicted *Relationship*. The explanation could be that, in the relationship with parents, more than in informing or facilitating parents, the ethnic differences and differences in educational level between teachers and parents cause a distance. So, it is encouraging that significant positive effects were found for the individual introductory conferences, both with and without correcting for covariates.

Limitations

Although the multilevel analyses indicated that the interventions, especially the individual introductory conferences, may contribute to improving school–family partnerships, this conclusion should be treated carefully. The interventions were tested in a non-experimental study without a pretest, so we cannot exclude rival explanations or claim causal relations.

Furthermore, we did not have control groups within the schools that implemented an intervention but used control schools with similar populations instead. Moreover, we restricted the control activity to the conventional individual parent–teacher conferences and did not compare the alternative collective parent meetings with the conventional collective parent meetings. Also, the attendance of parents at the alternative collective parent meeting at one of the schools was low (46%), which possibly had a negative effect on the sample.

Home Visits

It was remarkable that two of the three schools in this study that had planned to implement home visits were unable to do so. However, Schools 10 and 11 conducted incidental home visits, and School 12 managed to organize structural home visits in the next school year. School 7 implemented alternative individual parent–teacher conferences during the study and introduced structural home visits in the year after the study. We added the individual introductory meetings at school as an alternative to the home visits because our explorative study (Lusse et al., 2019) revealed that although some schools were positive about home visits, other schools thought they were too time-consuming and too intrusive. Unfortunately, we were unable to analyze the results of the home visits or to compare their results to individual introductory conferences. Apparently more time is required to arrange and schedule home visits than to implement school-based interventions.

Attendance Figures

The attendance rates of parents in this study were striking, especially at individual conferences and in the lower grades of these schools (Grades 7–8). We registered an overall average attendance rate of 85%, with 97% for (all types of) individual conferences with parents in Grades 7 and 8.

The average attendance rates for individual conferences with parents in Grades 9 and 10 were lower (73%), but the variation between classes (21%–100%) was noticeable. Apparently, especially in the higher grades, some teachers succeeded in reaching out to all parents better than others. School 1 had an attendance rate of only 45% for individual introductory conferences in Grade 9 because one teacher had to conduct these conferences for both classes. This teacher was unable to meet all parents individually but spoke to most of the parents at a collective meeting a month later. The attendance rate for the alternative collective parent meetings at two schools varied. At one school, the average attendance in five classes was 92%, whereas at the other school it was 46%, due to the poor distribution of the invitation. The same school had experimented with these kinds of meetings a year earlier and had attendance figures of 93% (attendance figures of two classes in Grade 8; Lusse, 2013).

Because these attendance figures were collected in 56 classes at 11 urban secondary schools, we do not think these high attendance figures were a coincidence. The lower attendance rates in our study in the higher grades and for the alternative collective parent meetings at one of the schools were likely caused by poorly organized events. As the attendance figures were similar for both conventional and alternative procedures, we cannot claim that these

figures are the result of the alternative approach. Although teachers in urban secondary schools regularly complain about the lack of involvement of less educated parents, our attendance rates show that the schools in our study have no reason to complain about absent or uninvolved parents. We know that not all urban schools can claim these attendance figures, but it is encouraging that the schools in this study, conducted in one of the most disadvantaged parts of Rotterdam, managed to welcome almost all parents.

Implications

The interventions used in this study are based on a literature review and a former explorative study. School–family partnerships have been researched extensively and have generated considerable knowledge. Our study demonstrates the difficulties of using this knowledge to improve school–family partnerships in practice. With Epstein (2018) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), we suggest more focus should be directed at improving the practice of school–family partnership procedures. Furthermore, since current and future teachers are often not well prepared for working with parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Willemse et al., 2017), we need to invest more in their training.

Although we acknowledge the limitations of this study, the results of this first implementation of the alternative procedures confirm our direction to improve conventional school–family partnership procedures. In this study, most of the schools implemented only one intervention, and they did not always implement it efficiently. Therefore, we used our results to build a coherent approach for school–family partnerships and invested in sharing this approach with schools in the Netherlands. Although in this study only nine schools implemented an intervention, schools and teacher training institutes all over the Netherlands are slowly adopting this approach. Once more schools have implemented this approach, an experimental or quasi-experimental study can test whether the correlations found in the study represent causal effects.

Since many schools in the Netherlands recently have introduced individual introductory conferences, a (quasi) experimental study on the effectiveness of this intervention would be interesting, especially if we can compare the results with studies in other countries. Future research could also compare the effects of getting to know parents at school (individual introductory conferences) or at their homes (home visits).

The attendance rates in this study were higher than the schools expected and did not reflect the impression of schools that parents from disadvantaged neighborhoods are often absent in their child's school and school life. We were unable to find attendance rates of school–family partnership procedures in other studies and suggest more attention should focus on this issue. This

would allow us to compare attendance rates in different types of neighborhoods, schools, countries, and in various kinds of partnership procedures.

Endnotes

¹Urban schools are defined as schools in urban neighborhoods with an above average number of children with less educated parents and/or low socioeconomic environments, as well as a large diversity of ethnic backgrounds (Lusse, 2013).

²At the age of 12, Dutch students are divided in two streams of secondary education: *general secondary education* (senior general secondary education or university preparatory education: 5 or 6 years of education at Level 4 of the Dutch qualification frame), and *vocational secondary education* (prevocational education: 4 years of education at Level 1 or 2 of the Dutch qualification frame; Nuffic, 2015).

³Students who are not fit for regular secondary education attend schools for students with learning disabilities. Some of these schools offer education at the level of prevocational education. At other schools for students with learning disabilities, students finish their school without a diploma for secondary education.

⁴This article is based on new analyses of (a part of) the data of the first author's dissertation (Lusse, 2013).

⁵The fit of the one-factor model is: $\chi^2 = 256.133$, $df = 77$, $p < 0.000$; TLI = 0.854; CFI = 0.828; SRMR = 0.056; RMSEA = .090.

⁶The p -value of this χ^2 should be divided by 2, since variances cannot take negative values (Hox, 2010).

⁷The Wald test generates a t -score resulting from the ratio of regression coefficient and the standard error with a number of degrees of freedom equal to the number of cases minus the number of predictors minus one. For class variables, the number of cases equals the number of classes, for school level variables it equals the number of schools.

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