

School–Family Partnership Procedures in Urban Secondary Education, Part A: Strengths and Limitations

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Abstract

School–family partnerships may contribute to students’ academic achievement. This is particularly relevant at schools in urban neighborhoods where children are at greater risk of educational disadvantages. Unfortunately, at urban schools (especially at urban secondary schools), barriers between the school and parents often exist. In an explorative field study at four urban secondary schools in the Netherlands, we examined to what extent conventional procedures in school–family partnerships contributed to three key topics: achieving a positive relationship between the school and parents, positioning the student in this partnership, and facilitating parents to support and guide their child’s school career at home. Our findings indicate that teachers acknowledge the importance of these three issues, especially the development of positive relationships with parents. However, this awareness does not always lead to adjusting conventional school–family partnership procedures. Furthermore, when managing school–family partnership practices, schools do not sufficiently address the role and influence of the student or the facilitation of parents in supporting their child’s school career at home. Based on our findings, we designed several alternative procedures to help schools improve their school–family partnerships. In a second study, we implemented and tested these alternative procedures in 10 schools for urban secondary education.

Key Words: school–family partnerships, parental involvement, parent meetings, parent–teacher conferences, educational disadvantage, secondary schools, urban

Introduction

Since well-designed school–family partnerships contribute to students’ academic achievement, improving cooperation between the school and students’ parents may counteract educational disadvantage (Higgins, Kokotsaki, & Coe, 2012; OECD, 2012). Increasing educational chances is especially important in urban schools, where students are most at risk of lacking in school success (OCW, 2016; WRR, 2009). Urban schools are defined as schools in urban neighborhoods with an above average number of children with low educated parents and/or low socioeconomic environments and with a large diversity of ethnic backgrounds (Lusse, 2013). Students in urban preparatory–vocational (prevocational) education are particularly vulnerable. Prevocational education is the lowest of the two educational streams in which Dutch students are divided¹ at the age of 12. Prevocational schools offer secondary education to students from ages 12 to 16 (comparable with Grades 7–10).

The effect of school–family partnerships on academic achievement (e.g., students’ test results for language and mathematics) does not relate to all types of partnerships. Research clearly demonstrates the positive effect of parental involvement at home on students’ academic achievement, highlights a smaller but nevertheless clear effect of parent–teacher cooperation, but fails to show a direct effect of parent participation in the classroom or at school (Bakker, Denessen, Dennissen, & Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2013; Castro et al., 2015; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Since the importance of parental involvement at home is clear, it could be beneficial when teachers not only align the guidance of the child at home and at school, but also facilitate parents to support and guide student learning at home (Lusse, 2013, 2016). However, this is not easy to implement in urban contexts, as barriers can hinder a positive relationship between school staff and parents (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Davies, Ryan, & Tarr, 2011; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) suggests that the student may bridge this barrier between teachers and parents, because the student is familiar with both school and home culture. Therefore, to be able to facilitate parents to support and guide their child at home, it is important to first achieve positive relationships with parents and to reconsider the position of the student in this relationship.

In the following sections, we first discuss the relevant literature on these three key topics of urban school–family partnerships: 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. We then present our research questions.

Achieving a Positive Relationship Between the School and Parents

The way schools cooperate with parents might influence parents' perception of their own role and increase their efficacy in helping their child to succeed at school (Jeynes, 2012; Lusse, 2013). Particularly in urban contexts—where backgrounds, styles of communication, and parenting are often different—barriers exist between schools and parents (Bakker et al., 2007; Davies et al., 2011; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein & Associates, 2009; Jeynes, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007). These barriers are particularly apparent in the lower levels of secondary schools, where parents experience school to be less accessible than in primary schools (Davies et al., 2011; Lusse, 2013; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). Secondary school teachers experience an absence of parents at school and often assume that parents who do not visit their child's school are not supportive to their child at home either (Bakker et al., 2007; Lareau, 2003).

Research indicates that improving the relationship between school staff and parents contributes to overcoming the barriers between schools and parents (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). To achieve a positive relationship, it is important that parents have *confidence* in their child's teacher, feel *welcome* at school, and experience *reciprocity* in their communication with school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein & Associates, 2009; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). It is important that teachers adopt a proactive attitude and acknowledge the contribution parents make in their child's development. Parents are more likely to be involved and visit the school if the teacher has regular contact with them and has a welcoming attitude (e.g., Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Seitsinger et al., 2008). A relationship can develop by giving priority to individual contact between parent and teacher (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). Reciprocity in the conversation requires a transition from one-way communication to two-way communication (Davies et al., 2011) and from not only exchanging information about the academic achievement of the student at school, but also about the child's development at home (Lusse, 2013).

Positioning the Student in School–Family Partnerships

The *role* of the student in school–family partnerships seems to be especially relevant in urban contexts, where major differences between home and school culture may occur. As stated before, the student, who is familiar with both the culture at home and at school, may bridge this gap. By placing the students (and their interests) at the center of the conversation, parents and

teachers are more likely to find common ground. This requires the presence of the student during meetings and conferences between school staff and parents (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

In secondary education, most students still want their parents' support and appreciate a positive relationship between their parents and their teachers (Barge & Loges, 2003). However, adolescents want to have more control over the cooperation between their school and their parents and do not want to be an exception compared to their peers (Van Esch, Petit, & Smit, 2011). The literature also draws attention to the child's influence on the way parents show their involvement in their child's school career at home. It is easier for parents to be involved when their children have an inviting attitude towards them (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Walker, Wilkens, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

Facilitating Parents to Support and Guide Their Children During Their School Career

Parents who offer their children encouragement, reinforcement, instruction, and modeling (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005) help them to gain confidence, create a positive self-image, and develop autonomy and the intrinsic motivation they need to be more successful at school (Bakker et al., 2013; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007). This parental involvement at home includes both pedagogical and educational support as well as support in the educational choices students make in their school career (Lusse, 2016). *Pedagogical support* is the degree to which parents show they have confidence in their child and encourage the child in an authoritative manner, with both discipline and warmth (Catsambis, 2001; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2007). *Educational support* is the degree to which parents have expectations of their child's school performance (Castro et al., 2015; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007, 2012), show an interest in the child's school experiences and learning, and help the child to organize school life (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Jeynes, 2007). Although schools and parents assume that supervision and support with homework is the main aspect of educational support, studies on this topic show contradictory results (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007). One explanation for these negative results is that parents seem to focus on homework when their child is not achieving well. In other words, the child's poor grades attract the parent's attention. Another explanation is that parents can be too controlling (instead of encouraging) when they supervise their children

with homework. In these cases, parents offer educational support with an inefficient pedagogical approach (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Interactive homework like TIPS (Teachers Invite Parents into Schoolwork), which supports a natural conversation between parent and child about learning, has proven to be effective (Epstein & Associates, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2011). *Support in educational choices* means that parents act as a sounding board for the interests, talents, and choices in the school career of their child (Lusse, 2016).

Although the positive effect of parental support at home applies regardless of the socioeconomic status of the parents, the quality of support can be threatened by lack of parental knowledge or confidence (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). In particular, less educated parents can be uncertain of their role and efficacy in their children's school career (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005) and therefore unsure in fulfilling this role.

Although the literature review revealed substantial knowledge about efficient school–family partnerships in urban secondary education, it is uncertain whether this knowledge influences school–family partnership procedures in daily practice. More research is needed to improve school–family partnerships in practice (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). The aim of this study is to contribute to this body of research. Therefore, we first explore to what extent the conventional procedures of school–family partnerships in urban secondary education contribute to achieving a positive relationship between the school and parents, positioning the student in this contact, and facilitating parents to support and guide their child at home.

We focus on the following research questions:

1. What kind of school–family partnerships procedures do schools in urban secondary education offer to parents?
2. To what extent do these school–family partnerships procedures contribute to:
 - a. Achieving a positive relationship between the school and parents?
 - b. Positioning the student in school–family partnerships?
 - c. Facilitating parents to support and guide their child at home?

In the following sections, we explain the design and present the findings of this study. We use the strengths and limitations of the common school–family practices found in our study to transform them into alternative procedures for the improvement of school–family partnerships, which we implemented and tested in a second study, also presented in this journal issue (Lusse, van Schooten, van Schie, Notten, & Engbersen, 2019).

Method

Design

In an explorative field study,¹ we mapped the cooperation between schools and parents on the three aforementioned key topics in school–family partnerships at four schools for prevocational education in Rotterdam. Rotterdam is the city in the Netherlands with the lowest educational and socioeconomic level of parents (Entzinger & Scheffer, 2012). To answer the first research question, we performed desk research (of school guides, school websites, etc.) and interviewed stakeholders at the schools. To answer the second question, we observed school–family procedures and conducted semi-structured interviews with groups of parents, students, and teachers. In addition, we interviewed parents of students at risk of dropping out of school (poor grades, behavior, or school attendance) individually to give them more privacy to talk about these situations. When possible, we also interviewed these students and their teachers.

Instruments

The interviews and observations focused on how parents, students, and teachers perceived the relationship between the school and parents, the position of the student in the school–family partnership, and the facilitation of parents to support their children at home. Family members of the parents and special (bilingual) professionals who were connected to the school with the task to increase cooperation with immigrant parents helped if language problems occurred during the interviews. The topics in the interviews with parents, students, and teachers were similar but were formulated from their different perspectives. Table 1 provides an overview of the interview topics and points of observation in the field study.

Respondents

We selected four urban schools for prevocational education with diverse practices in school–family partnership. This selection was based on public information on the schools, interviews with experts in the educational domain in Rotterdam, and visits to open house days at eight schools for prevocational education. The combination of these four schools seemed to best represent the diverse practices in school–family partnership. Two of the schools (Schools A and B) are considered as having good practices, because they offer parents both conventional and alternative school–family partnership procedures. The other schools (Schools C and D) are considered as having regular practices, because they offer parents conventional procedures only. The scores indicating disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds of the four schools varied from 93% to

99%. The schools all have a population of students with a great diversity of ethnic backgrounds: 71%–94% of the students' parents have a mother who was not born in the Netherlands.

Table 1. Interview Topics and Points of Observation

<i>Research question 2a: Achieving a positive relationship with parents</i>	
Interview Topics	Points of Observation
The parents' experience of feeling welcome in the school. The parents' experience of appreciation by teachers. The satisfaction with (and possibilities to improve) the school–family partnership procedures schools offer to parents.	Welcome of parents at school–family partnership procedures. Informal contact between teacher and parent. Contribution and sharing of parent, student, and teacher in verbal communication.
<i>Research question 2b: Positioning the student</i>	
Interview Topics	Points of Observation
The student's appreciation of the cooperation between school and parents and of the involvement of parents at home.	Presence, role, and attitude of student in contact between school and parent.
<i>Research question 2c: Facilitating parents</i>	
Interview Topics	Points of Observation
The provision of information and support by school to guide the child at home. The possibility for parents to talk with the teacher about the development and guidance of their child at home. The parents' experience of support in guiding the child at home.	Subject(s) of communication during partnership practices (school- and/or home-related). How often the conversation focused on how parents (can) provide pedagogical support, educational support, and support in educational choices. Nature of message from school (positive, neutral, negative).

Interviews

We interviewed 74 parents, 99 students, and 63 teachers. Most of the respondents (53 parents, 92 students, 46 teachers) participated in group interviews. We interviewed small groups of three to six parents from each grade at all four schools and interviewed small groups of three boys or three girls (separately) from each grade at all schools. We interviewed four to six teachers of Grade 7 and 8 and of Grade 10 and 11 at each respective school. In the Netherlands, for each class, one of the subject teachers (called the class mentor) is responsible for parent–teacher contact for that class. We thus interviewed teachers who were class mentors.

During the selection of the respondents, we aimed at a diversity of parents in their educational level, gender, cultural background, and relation with the school. The students were diverse in their cultural background, behavior, and achievement. In addition to the group interviews, we interviewed 21 parents (7 parents of students with behavioral issues, 7 with troublesome attendance, and 8 with poor grades; some in more than one category), 17 teachers, and 7 students individually. Table 2 shows the respondents' backgrounds.

Table 2. Background of the Respondents

	Parents (<i>N</i> = 74)	Students (<i>N</i> = 99)	Teachers (<i>N</i> = 63)
Grade	Child In 23% Grade 7 25% Grade 8 28% Grade 9 24% Grade 10	4% Grade 7 6% Grade 8 26% Grade 9 24% Grade 10	44% Grade 7 or 8 56% Grade 9 or 10
Gender	62% Mother – 26% Father – 7% Mother + Father 5% Family Member	48% Girl 52% Boy	45% Female 55% Male
Edu- cation Level*	18% High 24% Average 27% Low 31% Unknown	100% Low	100% High
Cultural Back- ground (mother born in)	20% The Netherlands 47% Turkey/Morocco 18% Suriname/Antilles 14% Other 1% Unknown	14% The Netherlands 45% Turkey/Morocco 22% Suriname/Antilles 16% Other 3% Unknown	77% The Netherlands 12% Turkey/Morocco 10% Suriname/Antilles 1% Other 0% Unknown

*High level of education: graduated from university or university of applied sciences.

Average level of education: completed university preparatory or senior secondary (vocational).

Low level of education: completed prevocational or primary education or no formal education.

Observations

We observed 36 school–family partnership procedures: 22 observations of individual parent–teacher conferences and 15 observations of collective parent meetings at the schools. The procedures covered a range of activities for parents. Table 3 gives an overview of the observations and the main purpose of the procedure: pedagogical support, educational support, or support in educational choices (see the Results section for the explanation of this classification).

Table 3. Overview of the Observations by Purpose of Procedure

	Pedagogical	Educational	Educational Choices	Total
Individual Parent–Teacher Conferences	3 home visits	19 individual parent–teacher conferences to discuss academic achievement		22
Collective Parent Meetings		13 collective parent meetings to inform parents at the start of the school year	2 activities (1 collective parent meeting and 1 career fair) to inform parents about choices in education	15
Total	3	32	2	37

Analyses

To answer our first research question, we distinguished and defined school–family procedures focused on cooperation and communication between teachers and parents to support the school career of the child both at school and at home. We examined the extent to which the four schools offered each procedure and to which parents (and eventually students). To distinguish school–family partnership procedures, we compared our definitions with Epstein’s framework of six types of involvement (i.e., Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Associates, 2009). Table 4 presents an overview of the dimensions and definitions of school–family partnerships used in this study and compares these dimensions to Epstein’s typology.

Table 4. Dimensions and Definitions of School–Family Partnership Procedures Compared to Epstein’s Typology (Lusse, 2013)

Dimension	Definition	Type (Epstein)
Parental Involvement at Home (Home-Based)	Parents offer their child pedagogical and educational support and support in educational choices.	Parenting (1) Learning at home (4)
Parent–Teacher Cooperation (School-Based)	Teachers and parents exchange information about the development of the student both at school and at home, align their support and guidance, and facilitate each other.	Communicating (2)
Parental Participation (School-Based)	Parents volunteer at school, participate in committees, or participate in community programs.	Volunteering (3) Decision making (5) Collaboration with the community (6)

In this study, we focus on the dimension “parent–teacher cooperation,” comparable to school–home or home–school communication (Type 2 in Epstein’s typology). An important aim of this parent–teacher cooperation is to support “parental involvement at home” (comparable with parenting, Type 1 and learning at home, Type 4 in Epstein’s typology). This study focuses on partnership procedures between parents and the teacher who is responsible for the child’s class, at the individual, class, or grade level. Activities to increase “parental participation” (Types 3, 5, and 6 in Epstein’s typology) and activities offered by other school staff are excluded. We also excluded some activities aimed to inform parents about choices in education, because they are exclusive for the Dutch practice of free school choice and early streaming.²

To answer our second research question, we recorded and transcribed the interviews and coded them in Atlas-ti (Muhr, 2004, 2008). First, we unraveled the transcriptions at the school level per interview topic, specific procedure, and type of respondent (parents, students, or teachers) and gave text levels an open code. Then we merged the transcripts of the four schools and reduced the codes in axial codes at a higher level of abstraction (Boeije, 2005). This resulted in codes which presented the most important themes per procedure and per group of respondents. For example, text fragments from teachers who showed reluctance towards home visits were coded as hv-reluctance-t. Remarks by parents about the role of the student at meetings to discuss achievement were coded as mda-role of student-p. Per topic, we placed the codes in overviews to compare the differences in the opinions in and between the four schools, in and between the three groups of respondents (parents, students, teachers), and in and between the various types of procedures.

We recorded the observations in semi-structured registration forms and compared the results for each procedure first at the school level and then for the four schools together. When we found striking differences in opinion between schools and/or groups of respondents (e.g., home visits), we studied the results again and distilled the core arguments of the discussion. We reported our findings to the schools to check whether we had understood their practices well.

Results

School–Family Partnerships Procedures (Research Question 1)

As mentioned in the Methods section (under Analyses), we distinguished and described the school–family partnership procedures in the four schools which focused on the dimension “parent–teacher cooperation.” We classified these procedures by their main purpose: pedagogical,³ educational, or educational choices (see Table 3). Home visits were classified as a procedure with a

pedagogical purpose, because this introductory activity can create the conditions for a good parent–teacher relationship. Although the schools claimed that the collective parent meetings at the start of the school year had an introductory as well as an educational purpose, we observed no introductory activities to help the teachers and families get to know one another at these meetings. We therefore classified these procedures with only an educational (instead of also a pedagogical) purpose. Individual parent–teacher conferences to discuss achievement are focused on learning and were therefore also classified as educational. Meetings to inform parents about the choices students make during secondary education or choices after finishing secondary education (e.g., career fair to inform parents about choices for future education) were classified under educational choices. Table 5 gives an overview of the selected procedures and describes which schools offered which procedure in which grades and to which parents.

The overview shows that the four schools offer school–family partnership procedures that focus on conventional activities with an educational purpose (i.e., individual parent–teacher conferences, collective parent meetings at the start of each school year). The schools rarely offered procedures with a pedagogical purpose, such as introductory activities. Schools A and B were exceptions as they offered home visits in Grade 7. Home visits are not considered to be conventional procedures at most secondary schools, but are an exception at the two schools, both selected because of their good practices in school–family partnership. The schools also rarely offered activities to inform parents about educational choices. Schools B and C informed parents about educational choices during a conventional collective parent meeting. Only School A organized a collective activity for this purpose, namely, a career fair.

Achieving a Positive Relationship Between School and Parents in School–Family Partnership Procedures (Research Question 2a)

To determine whether students, parents, and teachers experienced a positive relationship between parents and school in school–family partnership procedures, we examined the key concepts in the literature review: *confidence* between parents and teachers, feeling *welcome* at school, and *reciprocity* in communication.

Table 5. Overview of School–Family Partnership Procedures

Procedure	Definition	Offered by
Pedagogical		
Home Visit	An individual introductory conference at the student’s home to get to know (the background of) the student.	Schools A and B offered an obligatory home visit to all parents of the new students in all classes in Grade 7. School A experimented with home visits in one class in Grade 9. There were about 20–24 students in each class.
Educational		
Individual Parent–Teacher Conference	An individual parent–teacher conference to discuss the student’s achievement and behavior.	All four schools offered several individual parent–teacher conferences to discuss the achievement of the students in each grade. At Schools A and D these individual parent–teacher conferences were obligatory for all parents. At Schools B and C, the individual parent–teacher conferences were obligatory for parents whose child had poor grades or behavior. Other parents were given the opportunity to meet with the teacher.
Collective Parent Meeting	A collective parent meeting with the grade teacher and all parents at the beginning of the new school year.	All schools offered collective parent meetings for all grades to inform parents about the organization and goals of the school year. The program usually consisted of an introduction of the principal for all classes of a grade and separate sessions for each class. All parents were invited. At three schools there were two or three special professionals (bilingual in the most common languages of the school population) who helped if language problems occurred. ⁴
Educational Choices		
Activities to Inform Parents About Educational Choices	Collective activities to inform parents about choices in education.	The four schools seldom offered this procedure. School C organized a collective parent meeting in Grade 8 to inform parents about subject choices. Schools A and B offered parents of Grade 10 an activity to inform them about further education after finishing prevocational education (School A organized a career fair with representatives from several schools for vocational education; School B scheduled a collective parent meeting).

Confidence

The collective parent meeting at the start of the school year is the first opportunity for parents to meet their child's teacher. All parents agreed about the importance of these collective parent meetings. Despite this, several parents did not attend them because they had to take care of younger children, work a nightshift, had another appointment, or had forgotten about it. At each school considered to be using regular practices (Schools C and D), about 30% of the parents attended the collective parent meetings. At the schools considered to have good practices, about 50% (School B) or 75% of the parents (School A) attended the collective parent meetings. At School A, school staff made it clear to parents that their presence was highly appreciated and called the parents who were not present afterwards to schedule a new appointment to meet. Apparently, some parents were reluctant or unable to attend a collective parent meeting. Some of the parents who did attend were accompanied by their child who could show them around the school, explain about the school organization, and often translate what the teacher was talking about. Teachers were disappointed that not all parents attended the collective parent meetings: "It is terrible that parents don't show more interest. This shows a lack of parental involvement. We invite parents to this parent meeting, and only four parents turned up" (female teacher, Dutch background, Grade 8, School B). As mentioned before, the schools did not provide a formal opportunity or activity for parents to meet the teachers. The introduction with the teacher was restricted to a handshake before the start of the program. Afterwards, parents queued for an opportunity to have a short one-on-one talk with the teacher.

Most parents first met the teacher of their child individually at the parent-teacher conferences to discuss the achievement of their child, offered in the third or fourth month of the school year. At two of the schools (B and C), parents of students who achieved and behaved well were welcome at these individual parent-teacher conferences but were not explicitly invited. These schools only obliged parents to attend if their child was performing poorly and/or was displaying questionable behavior. Some of the parents who were not invited did attend the individual parent-teacher conference, but others were afraid of being obtrusive and did not attend: "I wanted to meet the teacher, but my daughter told me that the teacher said I didn't have to come because her marks were OK. That's why I didn't go to the individual parent-teacher conference" (mother, Turkish background, Grade 9, School C). Some parents never met their child's teacher:

My parents have never been to a meeting to discuss achievement. It's only obligatory if you have bad marks. My marks were always okay. I've been here for two years now, and my parents have never been here. In

my opinion, everybody's parents should come to school sometimes. (girl, Surinamese background, Grade 9, School C)

At Schools A and B, which offer obligatory home visits to all parents of students in Grade 7, parents stated that these home visits can contribute to a positive relationship. A mother describes her daughter's previous teacher, who visited the family at home: "Mr. X was...like family" (mother, Turkish background, Grade 8, School B). Not only parents, but also students experienced home visits as positive interest from the teacher: "[It feels like] someone really cares about me and wants me to have a beautiful future" (girl, Dutch background, Grade 7, School B). Home visits are time-consuming for teachers. Teachers at Schools A and B emphasized that a home visit was time well spent, because it allowed them to understand the children and their home environment better. However, at the schools where home visits were not a regular procedure, the opinions about these visits varied. Parents were mostly positive, but about half of the interviewed teachers and some students (especially boys in Grades 9 and 10) experienced these visits as intrusive: "Terrible. I think it's horrible to intrude in people's homes....Parents don't appreciate it either" (teacher, Dutch background, Grade 9, School D).

Welcome

The friendliness of the school staff is important for how welcome parents feel at school. Almost all the parents reported that the school staff were friendly and made them feel welcome, and our observations confirmed this during all the partnership procedures. However, if problems arose, the tone in discussions, telephone calls, and letters to parents sometimes changed, and parents experienced being treated as if they were behaving badly instead of their child: "She [a staff member] wasn't friendly at all. I'm a mother. Nobody can speak to me like she does. I'm not a little girl!" (mother, Turkish background, Grade 10, School A). These cases mostly happened during meetings that were not regularly scheduled by the school but arranged after an incident had occurred. Sometimes this unfriendly tone was also observed at individual parent-teacher conferences, especially when parents were invited to discuss their child's low marks or bad behavior.

Although parents usually found the teachers to be friendly, there was little informal conversation between them during the partnership procedures. Especially during individual parent-teacher conferences, there was no informal start to the discussion to lower the barrier between teacher and parent, we assume because of lack of time. At collective school-parent meetings, the teachers often did not know which parents belonged to the children in their class and were therefore reluctant to approach individual parents. School A

solved this problem by giving all parents in the same class a name tag in the same color. More informal contact was observed due to this simple practice.

More surprising was the influence of the organization of the partnership procedures on the extent to which parents felt welcome at school. Parents did feel welcome at well-organized events, where school staff welcomed them at the front door as did the teacher at the door of the classroom. However, in the observations, the communication and organization of partnership procedures was often unclear, inaccurate, or untimely, especially at collective parent meetings. Invitations were often not distributed or were distributed by students who forgot to hand them over to their parents. Changes in dates and times were sometimes poorly communicated. For example, a collective parent meeting started earlier than mentioned on the invitation, and parents arriving at the correct time felt uncomfortable because they were late. Another time, the front door of the school was locked, and some parents were not noticed until later when the collective parent meeting was almost over. One of the parents stated: “It went wrong. It was a pity, because when I arrived, almost everybody had already left” (mother, Antillean background, Grade 8, School D).

Reciprocity

To measure reciprocity during school–family partnership procedures, we measured the time teachers and parents talked together (dialogue) and the time only the teacher spoke (monologue). As expected, monologues were most frequent (95%) during the collective parent meetings. However, during collective activities like the career fair offered at School A, more reciprocal interaction was observed. During individual contact, the teacher did most of the talking (80%) at individual parent–teacher conferences. During home visits we observed more reciprocity (the teacher did 60% of the talking). Furthermore, parents and students mostly reacted to the information offered by the school. Exchanging information about the development and guidance of the student at school and at home seldom took place.

The Position of the Student in School–Family Partnership Procedures (Research Question 2b)

To determine the role of the student in school–family partnership procedures, we examined the key concepts in the literature review: the *role* of the student, and the student’s *invitation* to the parents to be involved in their school life.

The Role of the Student

In the observed partnership procedures, all students were present during home visits. Due to policies at Schools A and D, almost all students were

present at individual parent–teacher conferences. However, School A followed this policy more strictly than School D. The role of the students in the conversation depended on the skills of the teacher to execute a balanced conversation with three participants.

At Schools B and C, the teachers decided whether the student should be present at the individual parent–teacher conference to discuss the student’s academic achievement. Some teachers left this choice to parents and students, and others did not allow the students to be present: “If they join their parents, I tell them to wait outside. I’m going to have a talk with your parents” (female teacher, Moroccan background, Grade 8, School C). The students preferred to be present at the individual parent–teacher conferences (and the parents mostly agreed): “If I’m not present, they’ll gossip about me” (boy, Antillean background, Grade 8, School D).

If I’m there at the parent–teacher conference, I don’t have to ask my parents about it when they get home. They won’t tell you everything at once. If I’m at the conference, we can talk about it on our way home. (girl, Surinamese background, Grade 9, School B)

Most parents agreed with their children, mainly because they wanted to avoid any misunderstandings:

Then she can listen herself. When I go to this parent–teacher conference without my daughter, she always asks me what the teacher said, and I tell her what he said, and then she says that it’s not OK and that he’s not telling the truth. (mother, Moroccan background, Grade 9, School B)

Students were seldom present at regular collective parent meetings, and if present, they were ignored most of the time: “You’re sitting there listening, among all those parents. Your classmates usually don’t come, so you’re all alone” (girl, Turkish background, Grade 9, School A). Almost all students were present at activities to discuss educational choices. At the career fair (School A), teachers actively helped students and their parents to overcome their insecurity to speak to the representatives of schools for vocational education.

The Student’s Invitation to the Parents

A lot of students talked with their parents about school: “When I get home, my mother always asks me how school was today” (boy, Moroccan background, Grade 7, School C). “Yes, my family does too. Especially when I returned from a school trip. Everybody was sitting around the table and asked me about it. Everybody asked me” (boy, Surinamese background, Grade 7, School C).

Although most of the students were glad when their parents asked them about their school life or when they attended school–family partnership

procedures, not all students were positive about their parents' involvement. A key factor seemed to be the experience of most students—that there was too much focus on their low marks and inappropriate behavior during school–family partnership procedures:

Even if you're quite well-behaved, the teacher will always have a list of naughty things you have done. So, your parents only hear the bad things you've done and never get a big list of the things you've done well. (boy, Dutch background, Grade 9, School B)

Our observations confirmed this. Teachers (and parents) focused on the negative aspects of the student's performance or behavior, especially at individual parent–teacher conferences. This also happened when parents were invited for a positive conversation. Even teachers who emphasized the importance of a positive message during the interviews struggled with this focus during parent–teacher conferences. Although the conversation during the home visits were generally more positive, a negative incident was always mentioned. The message in the collective parent meetings was more neutral. Students who were confronted with negative remarks or with tension between their teacher and their parents seemed to be tense. They were more inclined not to support the cooperation between school and their parents. Pupils who experienced a focus on low marks and inappropriate behavior not only discouraged their parents from visiting school in the future, but also discouraged them from being involved in their school career at home:

My parents asked to see my lesson schedule, but I never gave it to them, and we received a letter about Magister [online access for parents to the marks of their child]. I hid that letter, because I don't want my parents to look in Magister. I'll tell them myself when I get a good grade. (girl, Surinamese background, Grade 10, School D)

Another reason students discouraged their parents from visiting the school was the fear of being an exception. None of the students wanted a home visit if the teacher did not visit all students. Striking, though, was the behavior of a student (a 15-year old boy whose parents were born in Morocco) who requested a home visit. He was proud to guide his teacher (and the researcher) through his neighborhood to his home.

Facilitating Parents to Support and Guide Their Child at Home in School–Family Partnership Procedures (Research Question 2c)

To determine whether the school facilitates parents to support and guide their child at home, we examined the key concepts in the literature review: *pedagogical support*, *educational support*, and *support of educational choices*.

Pedagogical Support

If teachers want to facilitate parents to support their child at home, it is helpful to know something about the home environment of the child. During the home visits, the teachers from Schools A and B obviously got to know about the student's home environment. In our three observations, the teachers got acquainted with the parents, and the conversation focused on the background of the family. Nevertheless, the teachers sometimes lacked essential information about the child's home situation, especially if the student had started at the school after Grade 7 and if there were problems at home: "I've never talked about the situation at home with my grandchild's teachers. They never asked me about it" (grandmother, Antillean background, Grade 9, School A).

Teachers seldom had the opportunity to get acquainted with parents during the individual parent-teacher conferences. The home environment, the development of the child, and the support of the parents at home was discussed at 8 of the 19 observed individual parent-teacher conferences, but only marginally. In the collective parent meetings, the role of parents in guiding their child at home was discussed three times: the school explained a parent's duties twice, and there was a brief introduction of the role of parents in the school career of their child once at a collective parent meeting for new students in Grade 7.

According to the literature, encouragement is the most important pedagogical support parents can give to their children (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Some of the teachers in the four schools gave parents explicit reasons to encourage their child: "I tell parents that their daughter is doing very well, that she's so sweet; she works hard. The child is proud; the mother is proud. It is very supportive!" (female teacher, Dutch background, Grade 9, School B). However, several teachers were reluctant to trouble parents of children who achieved and behaved well, or they did not know how to discuss the development of a student with good grades. For example, an individual parent-teacher conference with the parents of a student with good marks and good behavior lasted two minutes. Most parents reported that they expected the school to contact them only if there was bad news: "Today, the school phoned to make an appointment for this interview. I was frightened and yelled to my son 'what did you do.' He answered he didn't do anything wrong" (mother, Cape Verdean background, Grade 9, School A).

As mentioned before, teachers focused on the negative aspects of the student's performance and behavior. This can lead to a more controlling attitude toward the parents, rather than to an encouraging attitude. This does not stimulate students to invite their parents into their school life or constitute an effective strategy of parents to support their child at home. Especially, parents of children with troublesome behavior experienced the constant bad news from school as stressful:

The school phoned very often....Each time I saw the school number appear on the display, I was afraid. I thought: this will be bad news again. You sense it will be bad news, because they don't call you if there's good news. Yes...you'll see good news on the report card. (mother, Turkish background, Grade 8, School B)

After one of these phone calls from school, this mother cut her daughter's long hair as a kind of revenge or punishment. Several other parents of students with troublesome behavior gave examples of similar scenes at home of which the school was not aware. On the other hand, parents were surprised when they got an unexpected positive message from school: "He's a remarkable man, that teacher, to call us with the message that my daughter was doing well" (father, Dutch background, Grade 10, School B).

Educational Support

Most parents had high ambitions for their children. In particular, immigrant parents want their children to take school seriously and to work hard for their future: "I give my own experiences as an example...I really had to struggle to achieve where I am now" (mother, Cape Verdean background, Grade 10, School B). This often resulted in a focus on high marks and homework:

[It's not right] if a child comes home and plays or watches television all day and nobody asks whether he's done his homework today. We try to make sure that the children in our house do their homework: homework, homework, homework! (adult sister of a student, Moroccan background, Grade 8, School A)

The teachers felt that some parents had unrealistic expectations of their child and that others were not encouraging their children at all: "Encouraging? They are forcing their child! [I want to say to those parents:] 'look in the mirror, and think about the happiness of your child!'" (male teacher, Dutch background, Grade 7, School B). These different points of view sometimes caused tension during the individual parent-teacher conferences.

Despite these different perspectives, teachers expected parents to support their children by checking their homework schedule. However, the teachers seldom shared these expectations explicitly with parents. Although teachers realized that not all parents could support their child with homework, only one of the schools (School B) structurally provided homework support. This school offered free homework hours, guided by the teachers, at the beginning of each school day. The other schools offered no support or interactive homework to help the student discuss homework with a member of the family. Several parents reported feelings of incompetence in the educational support of their children, and for some of these parents, this was a reason to register

their child at School B: “I can’t help her. Yes, that’s annoying, but I can’t....I’m glad I know the multiplication tables....I never learned those things myself” (mother, Dutch background, Grade 8, School B). In other families, sometimes brothers and sisters helped with homework or students went to community classes for homework support. In some families, parents and children took the opportunity to learn together: “My mother and I do my English homework together, so she can also learn to speak English” (girl, Surinamese background, Grade 7, School A).

At the collective parent meetings at the beginning of the school year, teachers informed parents about the subjects that would be covered. For some parents, especially parents with difficulties in speaking the Dutch language, these collective parent meetings seemed to be difficult to understand. Parents appeared to be ill at ease. They sighed, were restless, and sometimes left the meeting before the teacher finished—to the teacher’s annoyance.

Support With Educational Choices

Students make several choices during their prevocational education. However, most schools failed to inform parents about these educational choices:

We don’t offer parents much information or activities [about educational choices]. We do as much as we can with the students. We would like to inform the parents, too. But it is a hell of a job to organize this at school. That’s why we can’t give further information to the parents, too. (male teacher, Dutch background, Grade 8, School D)

In some cases, the school arranged a collective parent meeting regarding educational choices, but many parents—including parents with an average level of education and without problems in understanding the Dutch language—had difficulties in understanding the information provided. One parent stated:

At a sudden moment, I said, “This doesn’t make sense anymore.” They gave us so much information and so quickly. I think the school forgets that parents need more time to understand. School staff gave us the opportunity to ask questions, but I couldn’t formulate them—it was too difficult for me. (mother, Cape Verdean background, Grade 10, School B)

However, at the career fair at School A, the teachers actively supported parents and students to discuss any questions they had with the representatives of the schools for vocational education.

Discussion

This explorative study shows how three key topics in the literature about effective school–family partnerships are approached in school–family partnership

procedures in daily practice at four urban schools of prevocational education in Rotterdam. The results of this study show that there are many caring teachers who reach out to parents. However, partnership procedures still need to be improved. Although the teachers at the four schools were aware of the importance of achieving positive relationships with parents and of having a welcoming attitude, the confidence, and the reciprocity needed to achieve these positive relationships, this awareness could lead to a better adjustment of the conventional procedures of school–family partnership (individual parent–teacher conferences and collective parent meetings). Home visits may offer the best opportunity to create confidence between school and parents, and interactive events like the career fair allow more reciprocity than conventional procedures. Unfortunately, these procedures were rarely offered. Furthermore, schools could improve several organizational issues to help parents to feel more comfortable and welcome at school. More attention needs to be directed at the presence and role of the secondary student in school–family partnership procedures. Teachers and parents should focus on positive issues to encourage students. A focus on low marks and inappropriate behavior discourages students from inviting their parents into their school lives. In general, schools need to focus on how to facilitate parents in guiding and supporting their child at home.

We based our study on interviews and observations. Although we tried to get a representative sample of parents in the interviews, we cannot exclude the risk of self-selection of the parents. No far-reaching conclusions can be drawn from an explorative study of only four schools, all for prevocational education. Nevertheless, this study contributes to a better understanding of how students, parents, and teachers experienced school–family partnership procedures offered by four schools for prevocational education in Rotterdam and of the extent to which these procedures are aligned with the theoretical topics and concepts. The results of this study are in line with recommendations of others such as Matuszny, Banda, and Coleman (2007), who stated that parents should be engaged with two-way, proactive, and positive communication at an early stage. Murray et al. (2014) found similar organizational issues undermining school–family partnerships. Payne (2005) suggested schools should replace their formal collective meeting format with a “museum” format in which parents can come and go as they please and take their children with them. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) addressed the role of the student in the relationship and mentioned a teacher who organized “getting-to-know-you conferences” in which the teacher made sure the parents were doing most of the talking.

The aim of this study was to contribute to improving the daily practices of school–family partnerships. We reported on both the strengths and limitations of the conventional procedures with the goal of transforming them into

alternative procedures that are better aligned with the key issues of effective partnerships revealed by previous research. We implemented and tested these procedures in a second study (Lusse et al., 2019).

We propose well-organized *home visits* which can create a starting point for a positive relationship between teachers and parents and can facilitate parents in offering pedagogical support to their child. The effectiveness of home visits can be improved if teachers actively involve the student, engage in reciprocal conversation, and focus on positive messages to students and parent(s). However, because home visits are time consuming and may be experienced as intrusive, it is unlikely that all schools will adopt this procedure in all grades. As an alternative for or in addition to home visits, we propose an individual parent–teacher *introductory conference at school* early in the school year, which may be more manageable for schools. Both home visits and parent–teacher introductory conferences at school aim at getting to know the background and expectations of the parents and the talents and interests of the student, and either can be a starting point for a reciprocal relationship between teacher and parent.

In studied schools, conventional individual parent–teacher conferences did not seem to increase parent–teacher cooperation. They lacked two-way communication and did not align parent–teacher support to guide the student. Nevertheless, regular individual meetings offered at all schools and for all grades are the basis for cooperation between teachers and parents. We propose *alternative individual parent–teacher–student conferences*. These are held at school with the teacher, the parents, and their child to discuss the development and guidance (and not only the achievement) of the student at school and at home and to facilitate parents in guiding their child’s school career. All students and their parents are invited to be present and to take an active part in the reciprocal conversation. The alternative individual parent–teacher conference focuses on the student’s talents and successes and addresses educational choices and disappointments. The teacher, the parents, and the student exchange information about the student’s development at home and at school, adjust the guidance of the student, and facilitate each other in their role in the partnership.

Conventional collective parent meetings seemed to contribute little to the relationship between teachers and parents and to the educational support of parents at home. Activities to inform parents about choices in education were seldom offered. Furthermore, parents often had difficulty in understanding information at meetings. The experiences with the career fair suggest it will be interesting to explore the possibilities of alternative, more interactive collective parent meetings. We therefore propose *alternative collective parent meetings* instead of the conventional ones at which the teacher does most of the talking. These active and reciprocal collective parent meetings will enable parents and

students to experience aspects of the school program, educational choices, projects, and special issues. All students and parents are invited to be present and to take an active part in these alternative collective parent meetings. Teachers and new teacher candidates will need training to understand the reasons for changing the conventional procedures in favor of the alternative ones and to become familiar with these alternative procedures.

Apart from the need to test the alternative procedures, several other topics require further investigation. More studies are needed to examine the facilitation of parental support at home and to enhance the quality of the conversation between students—particularly those at greater risk—and their parents at home. Future studies could examine the position of the student in school–family partnerships more closely and investigate the introduction of interactive homework for the Dutch context.

Endnotes

¹This article is based on new analyses of a part of the data of the first author's dissertation (Lusse, 2013).

²The two streams of secondary education in the Netherlands are: *general secondary education* (senior general secondary education or university preparatory education: five or six years of education at Level 4 of the Dutch qualification frame) and *vocational secondary education* (preparatory vocational education: four years of education at Level 1 or 2 of the Dutch qualification frame; Nuffic, 2015). Parents and students are free to choose a school in these streams.

³Although three of the schools also offered special collective parent meetings about pedagogical issues for immigrant parents, the six observations of that partnership procedure are not included in the analyses for this article due to the limited number of parents who participated in these meetings. Furthermore, these meetings were not offered by teachers, but by special professionals working at several schools at the same time.

⁴The city of Rotterdam hosts about 175 nationalities, making it nearly impossible to provide interpreters for all parents.

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