



University–preschool collaboration in pre-school teacher education in Iceland

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Received: 30 January 2020 / Accepted: 13 January 2021 / Published online: 21 January 2021
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Abstract

Developing a third space in preschool teacher education is fundamental for a true partnership to thrive. Strong partnerships between stakeholders in teacher education can empower student teachers and influence their professional development. However, research indicates a disconnection between the theory that students learn and their practical applications in the field, which affects students' teaching practice. This study shed light on partnerships in preschool teacher education in Iceland, as partnership is the basis on which a shared learning space can develop and grow. The findings from focus group interviews with relevant stakeholders (on-campus preschool student teachers, remote preschool student teachers, university-based educators, school-based mentors, and preschool principals) indicated that partnership between universities and schools regarding preschool teacher education is weak. However, stakeholders seem to be genuinely interested in improving collaboration and establishing a stronger university–preschool partnership.

Keywords Field practice · Partnership · Preschool teacher education · Third space

Introduction

In our togetherness, castles are built.
(Irish proverb)

Research on preservice and other teacher education indicates a disconnection between the theoretical knowledge taught at universities and their practical applications in the field; thus, there are mounting concerns regarding how teacher education prepares students for practising teaching (Jónsdóttir 2015; Karlsson Lohmander 2015; Zeichner 2010). Many new teachers consider that field experience is the most valuable part of their education (Rozelle and Wilson 2012; Zeichner 2010). In a recent study on educational policy changes in Sweden, Karlsson Lohmander (2015) concluded that, although field practice is critical to preschool teacher education, students experience a gap between what they learn on campus (i.e. theory) and what they practice in the field. Furthermore, practice in the field and

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effective guidance are critical components of teacher education because graduated teachers have referred to their practical training as the most valuable part of their education (Mattsson et al. 2011).

Preschools are the first level of the educational system in Iceland (Preschool Act No. 90, 2008). Municipalities operate most preschools, but some are charter or private schools. Children can attend preschool from 18 months to 6 years of age, depending on the municipalities. Early childhood education and preschool teacher education in Iceland are parallel to their counterparts in other Nordic countries, in that they follow a model based on humanistic and child-centered values (Einarsdóttir 2011; Karila 2017).

In research conducted by Mork (2018), the relationship between field practice and departments of education in universities was investigated to reveal that, over the years, the gap between theory and practice in Icelandic preschool teacher education has expanded. When Jónsdóttir (2015) conducted an analysis on the third space in preschool teacher education in Iceland, she found a disconnection between the subject matter taught in universities and the field experience in Icelandic preschool teacher education. Jónsdóttir's findings also indicated that more collaboration is needed to empower the dialogue between teachers in the university and mentors at the preschools. Jónsdóttir's findings signal a need to restructure the practices surrounding preschool teacher education, focusing on a third space as a shared learning arena.

Given this scenario in the field of teacher education in Iceland, the present study examined stakeholders' initial views on partnership in early childhood teacher education by investigating how they perceive the partnership between preschools and universities, as well as what they consider most important. There are many stakeholders in preschool teacher education (e.g. policymakers, teachers' union, preschool assistants, principals and teachers, preschool children, parents, municipality preschool offices, student teachers and university-based educators. While consulting initial stakeholders about such collaboration—stakeholders included preschool student teachers, school-based mentors, university-based educators, and preschool principals—we investigated the foundations of their partnerships and how such partnerships affect students learning experiences as they gain practical experience in the field.

Creating a learning environment between universities and preschools

Research on the disconnection between the theoretical and practical aspects of teacher education has suggested several solutions to provide an empowering learning environment for students. One of these is the creation of a third space to be used as a learning environment. A third space is where the mentor's practical knowledge, the university teacher's academic knowledge, and the student teacher's learning meet to provide an opportunity to build a powerful learning environment (Zeichner 2010). Bhabha considers hybrid space a key factor in the concept of the third space because it is in this learning environment that hybridity occurs (i.e. two different elements and spaces adapt and together create something new) (Bhabha 1990; Zeichner 2010).

Although universities and preschools generally operate in separate spaces, each of these entities works towards the common goal of improving education. For this goal to be achieved, future teachers need to be provided with high-quality education. Therefore, as Lillejord and Børte (2006) argue, both university and preschool stakeholders need to work together to promote student teachers' professional learning for such partnership to be successful.

The challenge is to create a learning environment where the two cultures (university and preschool) engage in mutual learning jointly with students so that experts in theory and practice can share their knowledge and experiences with mutual respect for one another's expertise and with minimum tension and hierarchy (Martin et al. 2011; Zeichner 2010). Meeting this challenge involves crossing boundaries and combining areas of knowledge from both practice and theory (Zeichner 2010). Creating such a learning environment, the third space, is important because it could strengthen future teachers' education and allow them to reflect on how the theoretical knowledge that they learned is relevant to practice and how practice can support theory. This goal probably can be accomplished by creating platforms for embracing both practical and theoretical knowledge, with such integration necessitating genuine collaboration among partners (Clark 2019; Korthagen 2010; Smith 2016; Zeichner 2010).

Partnership between universities and the practice field in teacher education

For a partnership to be successful, it is important to structure it according to the dynamics between the participants, with a focus on enabling and strengthening professionalism in teacher education (Lillejord and Børte 2006). Smith (2016) argues that, to improve practice in teacher education, true partnership is essential. This is defined as an agreement between teacher education institutions and stakeholders in education to work towards the shared goal of improving and educating student teachers. According to Simonsen (2017), the goal is not for universities and preschools as two different learning arenas to become alike. Because they are both important for student teachers' professional development, a mutual agreement between them regarding collaboration in education is necessary.

Smith (2016) argues that, to improve practice, the fundamental conditions of the partnership need to be familiar to all stakeholders and accepted by all participants (Smith 2016; Wenger 1999). This aligns with what Wenger (1999) refers to as a *community of practice* in which participants develop, negotiate, share their own ideas, and try to reach a mutual agreement.

Smith (2016) has identified three types of relationships between practice and universities in teacher education in Fig. 1, with three cases of collaboration between universities and schools placed alongside the continuum.

In the first model, schools and universities work separately. University representatives meet with school representatives to inform them about the practicum and then visit the school once or twice during the practice period. Here the power and decisions are within the university and the responsibility is clearly divided. In the second model, the university invites schools to apply to become partner schools, and the agreement between them includes mutual commitments and resembles a partnership. In the third model, the municipality, the school and the university work in cooperation. The school



Fig. 1 Typical school–university relationships in education (Smith 2016, p. 28)

then applies to become a university school and the municipality—in cooperation with the university—makes the final decision to be more cooperative and work in true partnership (Smith 2016).

In a study in Norway by Halvorsen (2014) on teacher education and practice across multiple teacher education programs with a focus on partnership, identified the qualities that support the expansion of a true partnership were identified: intentionality, unpredictability, flexibility, and vitality. Each quality can influence how partnerships develop and their capacity to expand into other platforms. When stakeholders engage in partnerships, they can have different expectations and often attempt to protect their independence. In contrast, partnerships that begin with a clear vision and a strong intention to work towards shared goals are more likely to be democratic in nature. However, if the intention is weak and the actors are forced to participate, then power struggles and tensions are the likely consequences.

Working in partnerships requires partners to adapt well to unexpected events because participants' reactions to unforeseen incidents are critical in determining whether learning occurs. A lack of trust between participants can result in them blaming one another when unexpected events occur (Lillejord and Børte 2006). When the unexpected outcome is viewed as problematic, participants are unlikely to develop mutually-beneficial partnerships (Lillejord and Børte 2006; Zeichner 2010). In contrast, if the unforeseen incident is approached as a challenge and if mutual trust exists among the partners, then such adversity can strengthen the partnership (Halvorsen 2014). Flexibility is another important aspect of partnership-based collaboration because participants can join for various reasons. If participants can free themselves from ingrained habits and rituals, then innovation, creativity, and engagement are likely to materialize (Ellis and McNicholl 2015; Halvorsen 2014). Without flexibility, partnerships are unlikely to develop beyond formal agreements because the partnership itself is negatively affected when participants are uncomfortable (Halvorsen 2014; Lewis 2012; Smith 2016). The vitality of a partnership can be negatively impacted if participants are unable to position themselves comfortably in it (Halvorsen 2014; Smith 2016). Dialogue and social connection play major roles in collaboration as studies on partnerships in teacher education suggest (Smith 2016; Zeichner 2010).

Recognizing the importance of facilitating the four qualities mentioned in Table 1 (Halvorsen 2014) and understanding the traditions of different systems could help to pinpoint the pillars of effective partnerships between preschool teacher university programs and preschools. Accordingly, our research question was: *What are stakeholders' perceptions of partnership between preschools and universities, and which aspect of collaboration is most important to them?*

To answer this question, focus group-interviews were conducted with various stakeholder groups. They were asked about their perceptions of collaboration between preschools and universities and which aspects of that collaboration were most important to them. Although Smith's (2016) and Halvorsen's (2014) definitions of partnership describe full-time students in teacher education programs engaging in clearly-defined practice, most students pursuing early childhood education in Iceland work in preschools while earning their degrees (Björnsdóttir et al. 2019). Interpreting findings in the light of the definition of true partnership and its four qualities (Smith 2016; Halvorsen 2014) might help to guide the design of new platforms and learning environments. These platforms would be conducive to the development of third spaces that support partnerships between early childhood education programs and schools in which students can gain practical experience.

Table 1 Qualities of partnership in teacher education. Adapted from Halvorsen (2014, pp. 58–69)

Strength	Intentionality	Unpredictability	Flexibility	Vitality
Strong	Clear vision and strong intentions Increased democracy	Challenges and mutual trust Learning experiences	Freedom and new ideas Innovation	Sustained engagement and creativity
Weak	Tensions and concerns Power struggles	Problems and blame	Restrictive habits and rituals	Difficulties in positioning themselves in the partnerships

Study design

Study context

Since 2008, preschool teacher education in Iceland has been a 5-year Master's program offered at both the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri (Mork 2018). Preschool teacher education in these two universities is rather similar, with field practice comprising 14% of the preschool teacher education curriculum (Háskóli Íslands 2019a, b; Háskólinn á Akureyri 2019). Because Iceland is a small nation with approximately 350,000 residents, no further descriptions can be added about these two universities and their organizational arrangements to protect the university-based educators' anonymity.

A study on first-year preschool student teachers at the University of Iceland showed that 90% of students work while earning their degree (Björnsdóttir et al. 2019). 64% of students at the university of Iceland who work in preschools have a contract with the municipality, which assists them financially during their studies (Jóelsdóttir 2018). In this study, all remote students ($n=9$) worked full time (40 h) and 1/3 ($n=3$) of on-campus students worked full time while studying. The other six students worked part time (ranging from university school holidays to 10 h a week) with their studies.

Participants were chosen via a mix of purposeful and snowball sampling. The group sizes varied from 2 to 6 participants. One prospective participant from each stakeholder category was contacted and asked for the name of another potential participant; this was repeated until there were eight to ten names for each group (Bender 2013; Krueger and Casey 2015). The groups were associated to the two universities: five groups were from the southwest connected to the University of Iceland (UI), and five groups were associated with the University of Akureyri (UA). Although there were eight to ten individuals recruited per group, some eligible participants quit their studies prior to the interviews. Table 2 shows the criteria for the 10 focus groups with initial stakeholders, with two groups representing each of the following five categories: on-campus preschool student teachers (Group VI, $n=6$; Group X, $n=3$), remote preschool student teachers (Group I, $n=6$; Group VIII, $n=3$), university-based educators (Group IV, $n=4$; Group IX, $n=3$), preschool-based mentors (Group III, $n=4$; Group VII, $n=2$), and preschool principals (Group II, $n=5$; Group V, $n=6$). Each of these groups was interviewed once in November and December 2016. Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants to project their privacy.

Data collection

For data collection, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Bender 2013) based on the literature on how to create and sustain true partnerships and a third space as a

Table 2 Inclusion criteria for the interview participants

Interview group	Inclusion group
Preschool student teachers	Bachelor's or Master's students
University-based educators	Those teaching courses in preschool teacher education
Preschool-based mentors	Those mentoring preschool student teachers
Preschool principals	Those hosting preschool student teachers in preschools Those collaborating with universities

learning environment (Halvorsen 2014; Smith 2016; Zeichner 2010). The interview guide was pilot tested with two preschool teachers to gauge whether they understood the purpose of the study and the topic. To collect data on the stakeholders' perspectives on university–preschool collaboration in preschool teacher education, participants were first asked about their backgrounds and practical field experiences. This was followed by more-specific questions (see Appendix) about topics such as their roles in the partnerships and how they experienced university–preschool collaboration.

The data were categorized into datasets by organizing the participants into groups of stakeholders: preschool student teachers, preschool principals, university-based educators, and preschool-based mentors. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to “identify themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to research question” (Braun and Clarke 2016, p. 175), using both inductive TA (analyzing the data from the bottom up) and theoretical TA (using theory, and theoretical concepts in analyzing the data). The questions were prepared with reference to the literature on the topic of true partnership and third space (Smith 2016; Zeichner 2010) and with an analytical framework based on Halvorsen (2014) and Smith (2016). The focus groups were asked the following four key questions:

- What characterizes partnerships between preschools and universities?
- What is your role in the partnership?
- What affects the partnership between universities and preschools?
- How would you organize the partnerships among stakeholders?

Data were coded and sorted into themes according to the key questions asked in the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2016). The author conducted the initial categorizing and coding before the data were reviewed by two additional researchers who were familiar with the project.

Focus groups were used for the interviews because they are useful for collecting data about phenomena (Bloor et al. 2001), in this case involving collaboration and partnership in early childhood teacher education. The interviews spanned 45–95 min each and took place in a neutral setting. Six out of ten interviews took place in a preschool in the capital city and four interviews were conducted in the northern part of Iceland in a rented apartment. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and analyzed by positioning the study's purpose (Krueger and Casey 2015), namely, to understand the partnership between preschool teacher education programs and the schools where the students gain practical experience (Halvorsen 2014; Smith 2016; Zeichner 2010).

Findings

The study suggested that true partnership occurs seldom in preschool teacher education in Iceland and identified the need for stakeholders to understand the definitions and expectations of certain concepts (e.g. partnerships and field practice). The findings also indicated the need to reconsider partnerships with relevant stakeholders and re-evaluate what these mean to the various stakeholders (Allen and Wright 2014; Boge et al. 2009; Smith 2016).

Characteristics of university–preschool collaboration

Students did not experience a true partnership between preschools and their universities. Communication was based on universities informing preschools on students' assignments. Sometimes, information was not delivered to school-based mentors and, as Benný conveyed, "there is very little collaboration". One group of on-campus students noted, that because their education had a strong theoretical focus, the partnerships with preschools were one-sided and universities were in control.

School-based mentors generally reported the need to strengthen university–preschool partnership. Most communication occurred via email, and some mentors found the partnership one-sided. One group of preschool principals observed little or no partnership with universities, reporting a lack of dialogue between the institutions and wondering whether their knowledge was regarded as equal to the theoretical knowledge of university-based educators:

Elísabet: [...] they [preschool student teachers] know many things [theoretically] and can do many things [...] there is also a lot of knowledge out in the schools which they [preschool student teachers] need to learn and respect and see its importance [...].

The other group of principals reported different experiences and Agnes explained that universities offered education and support. Bára described how the collaboration had changed from being scarce to representing true partnership. She used a brick wall as a metaphor to describe the divide between the university and the practice field and how, in the last years, the "bricks have fallen one by one [...]".

University-based teacher educators had different experiences when it came to collaborating with initial stakeholders. One group reported positive relationships and good communication with the stakeholders, whereas the other group felt that a good connection was more important with students than with other stakeholders, as students are primary actors in education and thus the main stakeholders within the partnership.

Roles in collaboration

The participants also reflected on their roles in university–preschool partnership. Students reported different experiences with partnerships, depending on whether they were on-campus students or remote off-campus students working full-time in preschools. The latter type of students expressed feelings of being burdens to the system. One group of on-campus students discussed how their courses differed, depending on whether they were taught on campus or remotely, and that their connection to university teachers decreased if they took remote courses. The other group mentioned that their role involved asking questions and spending their practicum time reflecting on how to connect theory to practice.

The mentors agreed that their role was to educate students by connecting theory with practice. Dísa mentioned the importance of speaking positively about early-childhood education and emphasized the value of the teacher education. Bjarma agreed that "talking about early childhood teachers' work with positivity is critical as teachers' views and attitudes can influence students' field practice and their values".

One group of preschool principals viewed themselves as spokespersons for university–preschool collaboration and advocates of the connection among stakeholders.

Bára used a tunnel as a metaphor to explain the principals' role in the partnership and argued that they could open or close communication. Díana agreed, adding that a principal's role was complicated. Bára also mentioned that principals' roles involved being aware of their attitudes toward stakeholders and partnership. Principals had the power to restrict communication or keep it open to what they believed was important.

The other group of principals neither had similar experiences with university–preschool partnerships, nor thought that they knew about the intentions behind the partnerships. While working in collaboration, they felt more like servants than partners. Elísabet expressed this view:

It's the universities' role to lead the communication since they [...] supervise the students [...] You could say that we, in the field of practice, are a kind of servants to the university [...].

The university-based educators performed different roles, depending on their positions. The majority did not view themselves as part of the partnership, but as university educators who mentored students. Annetta mentioned her limited contact with other students, as face-to-face communication was replaced with emails in long-distance learning.

Factors impacting university–preschool collaboration

Participants also reflected on what conditions either promoted or restricted partnership among stakeholders. When students were asked what factors promoted partnership between institutions involved in a field of practice and universities teaching that field, one group mentioned cooperation, flexibility, and the need to inform stakeholders of the intentions behind field practice. Many students who worked full-time while studying expressed a desire for change in the practical requirements so that they could work with their current group of pupils and connect theory to their current practice. Some Master's students could complete their practicums in the schools where they worked, while others were required to leave their preschool-based jobs for two to three weeks at a time. These students were stressed by the knowledge that their co-workers would struggle under increased workloads. Students spoke about being torn between their role as students and their role as workers in the preschools and reported that they experienced little or no pleasure in such work-based learning. Alís mentioned that her contract with her municipality allowed her to continue earning her salary while completing her practicum, but she felt guilty about leaving her co-workers and children.

When asked to name what factors would affect university–preschool partnership, one group of school-based mentors mentioned that more regular, face-to-face meetings would improve collaboration. They talked about the importance of open communication to strengthen the collaboration.

Both groups of university-based educators discussed improving their connection to the field, primarily because cooperation with the actors would be rewarding. Berglind mentioned the significance of a positive attitude toward the field in enhancing that connection:

I find it really important to be able to go into the field, for us university teachers to be able to experience it, to sense it, to have a feeling of the schools and hear more voices in the schools. I would want it [the collaboration with practice field] to be considered the strongest post there [in the partnership].

When asked what factors could hinder collaboration, both groups of principals named disrespect and negative attitudes among stakeholders, as well as poorly-defined partnership roles. Both groups of university-based educators discussed how other stakeholders—for example, teachers' unions and municipalities—could stifle university–preschool collaboration. Teachers' unions could discourage teachers from serving as school-based mentors unless they were paid and municipalities could make decisions about field practice.

Summary

Depending on the stakeholder's position, partnership was described as either weak and strong. Stakeholders who initiated the partnership and were more informed about the intentions experienced strong connections. Those who reported experiencing weaker partnership (school-based mentors and the students) did not seem to be as well-informed about the intentions. Participants generally spoke about the importance of strengthening partnerships through increased collaboration and dialogue among stakeholders.

Some participants were uncertain about their roles in the partnership, leading to evident tensions and concerns. Those who knew their roles also understood the power of their positions and what they could do to either prevent or encourage true partnership. Overall, the participants mentioned that the general attitude toward the educational system and the partnership was an element that could either hinder or support partnership. Stakeholders, other than the initial stakeholders studied in this research, influenced the collaboration and were believed to affect the partnership.

Discussion

In this section, findings related to the four key questions are presented in relation to Smith's (2016) continuum of collaboration and definition of true partnership, as well as Halvorsen's (2014) four qualities that support the expansion of true partnership.

True partnership in the third space

Considering Smith's (2016) definition of true partnership and the continuum of collaboration, most partnerships in the current study could be placed on the separated side of the continuum (see Table 3). There seems to be little experience of close partnership in preschool teacher education in Iceland. Smith (2016) argues that developing a true partnership entails putting rhetoric into practice, which calls for all participants' involvement during discussions on co-constructing collaboration. The study suggests that it is particularly important for stakeholders to understand certain concepts, as well as what is expected of them. The research also identifies the need to reconsider partnerships with relevant stakeholders and re-evaluate what these mean to the various stakeholders (Smith 2016; Allen and Wright 2014; Boge et al. 2009). Flessner's (2014) self-study of how to utilize third space for rethinking teaching and teacher education involved developing a place to reflect, renew knowledge and make changes. He concluded that it is important that scholars listen to practitioners to close the gap that seems to be forming between theory and practice, if the aim is to create a shared learning environment. Another study (Klein et al. 2013) on the

Table 3 Comparison of characteristics of partnerships in early childhood teacher education in Iceland with practice schools and partner schools

Practice schools	Partner schools
Responsibilities of preschools and universities are clearly divided	Schools issue call for students at universities
Universities teach theory, whereas preschools teach practical skills	Principals commit to accepting students during the partnership period and allow some teachers each year to attend mentor education programs offered by the university
Students learn in two separate arenas	
Communication is mostly written	Universities offer mentor education that provides academic credits that mentors can apply in Master's programs
Face-to-face meetings are few	
Students are mentored by teachers without mentor education	Yearly joint seminars involve university-based educators, school principals and coordinating mentors
Universities decide the duration of practice	Schools serve as contexts for research and development

creation of the third space showed that the work is messy, complicated, and nonlinear, and that creating new learning environments for teacher education is a struggle.

In Iceland, a university–preschool partnership represents an arrangement, partially resembling that of practice schools and, to a minor extent, that of partner schools. Table 3 presents a comparison of partnerships in early-childhood teacher education with practice schools and partner schools. In these partnerships, the power to encourage dialogue and communication about practice seems to lie with universities (Smith 2016; Lewis 2012).

While preschool principals were discussing how they experienced partnerships, one group's members stated that their partnerships with universities offered mentoring and collaboration though it seemed that the formation of practice schools was still being developed. The other group of principals described communication from a perspective that was more closely aligned with that of collaboration with practice schools. In other words, universities exercised power while preschools' role was to serve higher education. That group's members described feeling powerless and simply waiting for universities to issue instructions to them. According to Lillejord and Børte (2006), a partnership's dynamics might create tension that often prompts a power struggle if stakeholders are not regarded as equal partners. According to Klein et al. (2013), the third space is like a utopian world that invites participants to act, create and discuss in new ways, but this study suggests a need to create a mutual learning environment (Martin et al. 2011; Zeichner 2010).

Qualities of true partnership

The study revealed weak communication within the partnerships, which seems to affect students' learning. Students experiencing power struggles between stakeholders might affect their ability to apply their theoretical knowledge in the practicum (Lewis 2012). These responses suggest a need to reconsider the agreement between stakeholders (Smith 2016). This is a concern because it is important for student teachers to experience a comprehensive education with collaboration and mutual respect among the university and the practice field. Lillejord and Børte (2006) emphasized that tension in the partnership can affect student teachers' learning and their ability to connect theory to practice.

Halvorsen's (2014) four qualities are effective for developing and expanding platforms for true partnership. Lillejord and Børte (2006) argue that the most-pressing concern when forming a partnership is how to establish a productive dialogue between school-based mentors and university-based educators. Therefore, students are likely to benefit from the formation of a third space, where initial stakeholders can mediate and combine students' experiences to further empower growth (Lewis 2012).

The group of principals who understood the intentions behind the partnership were confident in their roles in the collaboration, which represented strong intentionality (Halvorsen 2014). They viewed themselves as figurative tunnels occupying the powerful position of either hindering or encouraging partnership. In contrast, the other group felt that they neither had a purpose in the partnership nor were in a position to ask anything from the universities, which represented the kind of weak intentionality that would breed tensions and power struggles (Halvorsen 2014). Martin and colleagues' (2011) research on relationships in a school–university partnership showed that, if university-based educators developed a good working relationship with principals, this strengthened the partnership, as was evident in the present findings.

Other groups of participants also expressed weak intentionality (Halvorsen 2014), suggesting that attention to this quality is needed when forging partnerships. By strengthening intentionality, participants will know what is expected of them and not feel coerced to collaborate. This precaution appears important when constructing platforms to facilitate true partnership in teacher education (Halvorsen 2014; Martin et al. 2011; Zeichner 2010).

Some groups perceived the unexpected to be more of a problem than a challenge, suggesting that the quality of unpredictability needs to be strengthened (Halvorsen 2014). When uniting discourse and knowledge about partnership, mentoring, and early childhood education within the partnership, actors can scaffold their learning and expand their knowledge while building bridges between what they and others know. Building bridges is an important aspect of the partnership, because it helps participants to understand how they and others experience the world (Moje et al. 2004).

Some stakeholders experienced freedom and shared responsibility in university–preschool collaboration. This experience was apparent in both groups of university-based educators and one group of principals. One group of school-based mentors also expressed a sense of shared responsibility for developing new ideas for preschool teacher education. Such findings support the need for flexibility in partnerships (Halvorsen 2014), but other groups did not share this experience. The students, one group of school-based mentors and one group of principals mentioned that rituals and habits smothered collaboration (Halvorsen 2014). They reported lack of dialogue and university-based educators' invisibility to actors in field practice. Meanwhile, students mentioned that their studies were often more directed toward elementary teacher education than preschool teacher education, and remote part-time students felt that they were burdens to the arrangement preferred by their universities and that their education was not designed for working students who already had considerable practical experience. Research suggests that, by connecting theory to practice in a joint learning environment between universities and schools, student teachers are likely to be more involved and feel empowered and more competent, which might strengthen their professional understanding (Allen and Wright 2014). Because flexibility in their partnerships seems weak, they lack the opportunity to expand their partnerships; after all, flexibility is necessary when working with others (Halvorsen 2014; Zeichner 2010).

Although the findings do not clearly portray the degree of vitality in university–preschool partnerships, some stakeholders struggled to articulate their roles in these partnerships. This situation aligns with what Halvorsen (2014) calls weak vitality. A partnership's

vitality might be negatively impacted if participants are unable to position themselves comfortably in it (Smith 2016; Allen and Wright 2014).

Generally, the participants wanted to strengthen partnerships among stakeholders and believed that, to this end, all stakeholders' involvement and collaboration were essential. Allen and Wright (2014) draw similar conclusions, stating that the optimal practicum for students is when stakeholders are sure about their roles in the partnership. In such an environment, students believed that they could better apply theory in practice. However, where there was confusion about the respective responsibility of universities and preschools, they believed that it affected their ability to link theory to practice.

By categorizing the data according to Halvorsen's (2014) qualities that support the expansion of true partnership, the suggestion would be to start with intentionality and unpredictability to build a foundation of true partnership. These qualities are fundamental for developing trust among partners, whereas the other two qualities of flexibility and vitality might be further developed through dialogue when actors know each other's intention and the expectations of the partnership.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine initial stakeholders' views and experiences of partnership in a shared learning environment during field practice in preschool teacher education. Partnerships play a vital role in offering students' access to dialogues between universities and the practice field and between theory and practice, and in a shared learning environment, a third space, which forms student teachers' professional development and identities.

Based on the findings, strengthening partnership in preschool teacher education is recommended, and this requires stakeholders to discuss the quality of the partnerships and to see where they position themselves along a continuum of collaboration (see Table 3). Regardless of their positions, the actors in partnerships need to voice their expectations, seek mutual understanding, and agree on how to nurture true partnership with the goal of creating a mutual learning space. A possible means to this end lies within Halvorsen's (2014) first two qualities of partnership: intentionality and unpredictability.

Further research is necessary to gain more knowledge about how to create a mutual learning space and how to strengthen partnerships in preschool teacher education in general, but especially in Iceland because such research is rare in that context. Caution should be taken when interpreting the conclusions given the small sample size and lack of complete transparency in the dynamics in the various groups. In retrospect, snowball sampling might have grouped participants with similar assumptions about the phenomenon being studied. Nevertheless, the findings are important because participants' voices should be heard to strengthen and develop the partnership and the mutual learning environment.

Appendix

How are partnerships between universities and the practice field in Iceland formed and sustained?

Opening questions

- Tell me about your education (where you obtained your preschool teacher education) and where you have worked.

Introduction

- How did you experience your field practice?
- Those who work in university/preschool—experience from the field before and how their experience now.

Transition

- What comes first to mind when you hear the term collaboration?

Key questions

- What do you think characterizes collaboration between preschools and universities?
 - Stakeholders are university teachers, mentors, preschool principals and preschool teacher students.
- What is your position in the collaboration?
- What affects the collaboration between universities and preschools?
 - What prevents collaboration?
 - What promotes collaboration?
- How would you organize collaboration between stakeholders?

Ending question

All things considered.

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