Home–School Collaboration in the View of Fourth Grade Pupils, Parents, Teachers, and Principals in the Finnish Education System

Marjorita Sormunen, Kerttu Tossavainen, and Hannele Turunen

Abstract

Although Finland currently holds the top ratings in international comparisons ranking education and children's health, there is evidence that the health of Finnish adolescents is being threatened by increasing obesity, serious risk behavior, and other health problems. In addition, subjective well-being at school is regarded as low by students. Besides the harm to individuals' health, these issues are influencing students' ability to learn and concentrate at school. Collaboration between home and school can be an effective tool for preventing these problems, given the knowledge that elementary school-age children's health learning is highly influenced by these two environments. While multiple international studies demonstrate the importance of effective home–school connections, the position of parents has only recently gained growing attention in the Finnish education system. This study examined home–school collaboration from the perspectives of children (aged 10–11 years), their parents, class teachers, and principals through questionnaires and interviews in four comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9). The results showed that the basic structures necessary to enable the children's academic success were established, but the potential to support their healthy growth and development collaboratively were only partly developed. The intent of the school personnel was to promote the children's learning and healthy development, but mutual collaboration between home and school was not goal-orientated, and therefore not fully nor systematically implemented in schools.

Key Words: home–school collaboration, parent–teacher, conferences, collaboration, parents, involvement, participation, comprehensive school, elementary school, Finland, PISA study, healthy, learning, teachers, students, principals

Introduction

Finland is a Northern European country of 5.3 million inhabitants (Statistics Finland, 2010). It has been ranked fourth in comparisons of child well-being among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (UNICEF, 2007) and among the best performers in educational attainment, based on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in reading, mathematics, and science in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009 (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010). Due to the high standard of education in Finland, the learning opportunities of children from different backgrounds are similar, which is illustrated by very small differences in learning results between schools (Kupiainen, Hautamäki, & Karjalainen, 2009). In addition, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE, 2010) explains Finland's success in education, for example, by the completely free-of-charge basic education (including teaching, learning materials, school meals, health care, dental care, and school transport) and the teachers' universally high level of academic education (FNBE, 2010).

However, the findings on Finnish school children's relatively poor well-being at school (e.g., Currie et al., 2004, 2008) have intensified the discussion about students' well-being substantially in Finland and have led to many new developmental procedures (Kämppi et al., 2008). Additionally, low rankings in international comparisons as well in national studies in areas such as adolescent risk behavior (Currie et al., 2008; Lavikainen, Lintonen, & Kosunen, 2009), overweight and obesity (Isomaa, Isomaa, Marttunen, & Kaltiala-Heino, 2010; OECD, 2009), and mental health problems (Luopa, Lommi, Kinnunen, & Jokela, 2010), are placing Finnish children and adolescents at risk in both physical and psychological dimensions of health.

A recently published Finnish document, "Quality to home–school collaboration" (FNBE & FPA, 2007), places functional home–school collaboration as a central element of children's and adolescents' well-being at school. According to the document, the common goal of the collaboration is to support children's learning and healthy growth and development, which involves the responsibility and commitment of all stakeholders.

This study examines the prevailing practice in home–school collaboration at the beginning of the school health project targeted at developing collaboration between home and school in children's health learning. It is a part of a two-year

(2008-2010) research and development project undertaken within the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) in Eastern Finland.

Children's Healthy Development as an Important Goal of Home–School Collaboration

Today's communities where children grow differ substantially from the environments of previous generations. The choices that children make between healthy and non-healthy behavior have become more difficult, and even adults seem to struggle more and more with their own decisions regarding health. Still, the parents' role in educating and rearing their children in the area of health is significant, as the habits and behaviors of everyday living have a major influence on children's lives (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2005; Carlyon, Carlyon, & McCarthy, 1998; Sutherland et al., 2008).

Schools are also in a central position in creating health and well-being in childhood and adolescence (Blom-Hoffman, Wilcox, Dunn, Leff, & Power, 2008; Tossavainen, Turunen, Jakonen, & Vertio, 2004). Throughout their existence, schools in Finland have shared the common goal of increasing not only the academic knowledge, but also the health of children. Healthy students learn better, and better education leads to healthier people (St. Leger, Young, Blanchard, & Perry, 2009). However, schools alone cannot meet the new challenges that children and adolescents are experiencing; accordingly, the collaboration of the home and school has become even more significant.

The relationship between home and school has been an important issue internationally for decades, and it has been the object of considerable research, for example in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology (e.g., Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Cox, 2005; Harris & Goodall, 2008). The intensive research has indicated that the advantages of home–school collaboration are undeniable. For example, active home–school collaboration with high parental involvement has been found to strengthen children's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Kyriakides, 2005; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel, & Green, 2004) and bring about positive effects as far as the age of 20, also correlating positively with the children's length of schooling (Barnard, 2004). Even though there are many reasons for and desired outcomes in developing partnerships between the school and the home, the ultimate goal of that relationship is to help children succeed in school and in later life (Epstein et al., 2002). For example, in the U.S., several very successful programs have been launched in order to activate parental involvement, and structures and frameworks have been developed to help schools build connections with parents (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Epstein et al., 2002).

However, research on Finnish home–school collaboration is quite rare and is mainly based on doctoral dissertations. Studies in Finland from the last 10 years concern teachers' representations of their students' upbringing in the context of home and school collaboration (Hirsto, 2001), cooperation between home and school in the first two years (Siniharju, 2003) and in the last two years of comprehensive school (Metso, 2004), and generally in the pre-primary and primary school levels (Hirsto, 2010; Lehtolainen, 2008). The role of fathers in school has been examined by Torkkeli (2001), and the use of digital communication systems to facilitate interaction between home and school, by Latvala (2006). In addition, cooperation between parents and school nurses has been studied (Mäenpää & Åstedt-Kurki, 2008).

Finnish School Culture

Compulsory education starts in Finland in the year when the child reaches 7 years of age. The duration of basic education is 9 years, and only 0.5% of pupils fail to be awarded the basic education certificate. More than 96% of those completing basic education continue their studies at the upper secondary level (FNBE, 2010). If typical parental involvement in Finnish comprehensive schools is viewed according to Epstein's categories (Epstein et al., 2002), *communicating (type 2)* is clearly the most common form. It includes parents' evenings, usually held once a semester; optional parent–teacher conferences, occurring once at each grade level (or more rarely, at selected grade levels); phone calls, usually if some problems have occurred; and information sent home by the teacher, via paper or email. *Volunteering (type 3)* exists when parents attend the school as an audience, usually at school feasts once or twice a year or sometimes at other events. Parents can also collect money for a class trip or camp school, which is usually executed in the sixth grade. A few parents also participate in school councils and/or PTAs (*decision-making, type 5*). *Type 4, learning at home*, or *type 6, collaborating with the community*, have not traditionally been within the scope of collaboration in Finnish schools; parents obviously participate in their child's homework at some level, but this is more an underlying assumption than a mutually discussed or highly encouraged element of schoolwork. On the other hand, information related to educational health or well-being intended for parents, usually provided at school by an outside lecturer, has been quite a popular phenomenon among Finnish schools at all grade levels, being one form of *parenting (type 1)*.

The shared responsibility between home and school in childrearing is a current issue in deliberations concerning Finnish education. Growing attention to and awareness of the issues of home–school collaboration have quite

recently spawned broader discussions among policymakers, educators, the media, and parents. There are, however, many significant discrepancies between the rhetoric of policy documents and the practice of effective home–school collaboration in education. Even though the Basic Education Act (1998, Amendment 477/2003) highlights collaboration between parents/caregivers and schools, and the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (FNBE, 2004), through which the Basic Education Act is executed, further describes home–school collaboration and recommends including parents in the planning and evaluation of teaching and childrearing tasks (FNBE & FPA, 2007), the recommendations are quite rarely executed at the school or classroom levels, as earlier Finnish research indicates (Metso, 2004; Siniharju, 2003). Collaboration between home and school continues to be mostly one-sided, and parents are traditionally not viewed as significant partners in children's education.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the present study was to examine the prevailing practice in the home–school relationship from the viewpoint of pupils, their parents, class teachers, and principals, to attain a broad view and to form a starting point for improving developmental procedures in the schools. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do pupils, their parents, and school personnel describe parents' and other adults' roles in the school community?
2. What are the characteristics of collaboration between the school administration and parents and between class teachers and parents?

Method

Sample

All the fourth-graders (N = 173) and their parents or caregivers (N = 348), five class teachers, and two principals from four comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9) in eastern Finland participated in the study. The teachers and principals were interviewed, and the students and parents were surveyed. The response rate of the pupils was 89% (n = 154; girls n = 80, boys n = 74), and of the parents, 53% (n = 184; mothers n = 106, fathers n = 78). The teachers were all females; their experience as a teacher varied between 1.5 and 28 years; the length of teaching in their current position varied from 1 to 4 years. The principals had 9–29 years in a position of leadership at different schools, and 9–11 years in the study schools; one was male, one female. The ethnicity of all the participants was White. The schools' characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Schools (n = 4)

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Size of the school				
Pupils	630	491	477	311
Teachers*	59	37	35	31
Other personnel**	15	7	10	10
Total	*704*	*534*	*521*	*344*
Fourth-grade pupils	51	49	46	27
Size of the city/town, rounded	7,500	23,000	92,000	4,000
Characteristics of the city/town	rural	urban	urban	rural

*including special needs teachers

**including principals, secretaries, special needs assistants, school nurses and doctors, and school welfare officers or psychologists, if any; excludes canteen/cafeteria personnel, maintenance, and janitors

Design and Data Collection

At the beginning of the study, the local municipal federation of education and the principals of four schools authorized the research. The fourth-graders and their parents or caregivers as well as the school personnel were informed about the study, and the appropriate permission was obtained from them prior to the data collection.

The data were collected in the spring/early summer of 2008. The views of the pupils, parents, and the school personnel were considered important, being the parties of collaboration. In addition, a mixed methods approach was also used as a "tool" in this study; different forms of data were put together to make a more coherent, rational, and rigorous whole, which in this study made it possible to reveal the main ideas of all the groups of respondents (Creswell, Plano Clark, & Garrett, 2008; Pommier, Guével, & Jourdan, 2010).

The quantitative data were collected from the pupils and parents through structured questionnaires developed by the research group on the basis of the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cox, 2005; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein, Salinas, & Connors, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Poutanen, Lahti, Tolvanen, & Hausen, 2006; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004), as well as national documents (e.g., FNBE, 2004; FNBE & FPA, 2007). The questions concerned parents' participation and home–school collaboration. In addition, the pupils' and parents' background information was gathered. To check that the questionnaires were comprehensive, understandable, and contained valid and sufficient content, both questionnaires were piloted on fourth-graders in a separate school (n = 76) and their parents (n = 56). Minor revisions were made to the questionnaires after the pilot study.

The questionnaires, with a cover letter that assured confidentiality and included instructions, were delivered by the pupils to their parents in sealed envelopes with postage-paid, self-addressed return envelopes—one questionnaire for each parent available. The parents were asked to complete the survey and mail it back directly to the researcher within two weeks. The fourth-graders completed the questionnaire individually at each school during a 60-minute classroom period. The researcher distributed all the questionnaires to the pupils after informing them about confidentiality and that their responses would not be seen by anyone other than the project researchers. Instructions were given for filling in the questionnaire, and the pupils' questions were answered. Although written consent was not obtained from the pupils, they were informed that they could stop filling in the questionnaire or refuse to participate in the study (e.g., Mauthner, 1997).

Two very similar semi-structured interviews were developed for class teachers and principals with the purpose of gaining information about home–school collaboration and existing and desirable school procedures. The interview forms were based on the same documents and research as the questionnaires. The class teachers, who shared a similar education and work environment, were interviewed in focus groups of two and three. By using focus groups it was possible to get natural conversation around the study themes without going into more depth and detailed information, which was not the purpose of the study (Morgan, 2008). Because of their unique role in the school community, the principals were interviewed individually. The interviews were held at the participants' own schools, both during the school day and after school; they lasted approximately 1–1½ hours and were recorded digitally on audiotape.

Analysis

Analysis of the data from the surveys focused on using descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 14.0. A significance level of .05 was adopted for all statistical analyses. In the parents' survey, the background variables (gender: father or mother; year of birth: 1950-1959, 1960-1969, or 1970-1979; and education: comprehensive school or vocational school, upper secondary school or post-secondary level, or polytechnic or university) and home–school collaboration were described by percentages and tested using Pearson's chi-square test. The background variable gender ("mother", "father", "caregiver") was summed up in two classes ("mother" and "father"), because there were only three caregivers in the study, and the aim was not to determine the difference between biological and non-biological parents. Two female caregivers were classified as "mother" and one male caregiver as "father." Five-point Likert scale variables were classified into two classes ("agree"

and "disagree or cannot say"), as were five-point frequency measuring variables ("sometimes" and "never"). The question concerning the extent of using methods of collaboration between class teachers and parents was described using means, standard deviations, and numbers of observations, which were divided into five classes from "once a week or more often" to "never," and tested with the Mann-Whitney U-test. The pupils' survey was analyzed under two categories of variables ("agree" and "disagree or cannot say"), described by frequencies and percentages, and tested using Pearson's chi-square test. The only background variable used with the pupils' survey was gender.

The digitally audiotaped interviews of the personnel were transcribed and checked against the original recordings. The interviews were analyzed separately using inductive content analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Findings

Parents' and Other Adults' Role in the School Community

In the pupils' opinion, their parents usually participated in *school activities* quite often, while only one-tenth of the pupils stated that their parents sometimes visited *the class or school during the school day*. Parental participation would be appreciated by the pupils; they would like to have their parents sometimes attend school trips or school clubs and/or breaks or help in classrooms. The number of pupils who did not have a clear opinion of their parents' participation was high, varying from 16.4%–26.0% (see Table 2).

Nearly all the parents considered collaboration between home and school important. The traditional method of home–school collaboration, parents' evening, was perceived as necessary by the parents, and many parents also thought the school organized enough parents' evenings. In the parents' opinion, it is good that pupils also meet adults other than the school personnel in the school environment. The role of the principal in building the atmosphere at school was considered important by mothers and fathers (see Appendix A).

Besides parents' evenings, parent–teacher conferences were considered important by parents; nearly 90% of them would like conferences to continue throughout comprehensive school (Grades 1–9). Regarding school-organized activities, over half of the parents thought the schools organized enough *whole-school activities for parents*, contrary to their satisfaction with *whole-family-targeted activities*, which were considered sufficient by only one quarter of the parents. Moreover, most of the parents felt the school is responsible for building collaboration between home and school, mothers clearly more than fathers (p = .006). Parents would also like to diversify the forms of home–school collaboration. Less than half of the parents agreed when asked about

Table 2. Pupils' Opinions on Parental Participation in the School Community

Pupils' Opinions	Boys (n = 74)	Girls (n = 80)	Total (n = 154)
	%	%	%
My parents usually attend school activities			
Agree	79.7	67.4	*73.4*
Cannot say	12.2	21.3	*16.9*
Disagree	8.1	11.3	*9.7*
I like/would like to have my parents attend school trips sometimes			
Agree	58.9	57.0	*57.9*
Cannot say	17.8	15.2	*16.4*
Disagree	23.3	27.8	*25.7*
I would like to have my parents help at school clubs and/or breaks sometimes			
Agree	45.2	47.5	*46.4*
Cannot say	21.9	18.7	*20.3*
Disagree	32.9	33.8	*33.3*
I like/would like to have my parents help in the classroom sometimes			
Agree	40.6	40.0	*40.3*
Cannot say	29.7	22.5	*26.0*
Disagree	29.7	37.5	*33.7*
My parents visit my class or my school during the school day sometimes			
Agree	12.2	8.8	*10.4*
Cannot say	21.6	13.8	*17.5*
Disagree	66.2	77.4	*72.1*

whether parents were encouraged to take an active role in the school community, and a majority of the parents were not sure or disagreed on whether home–school collaboration is evaluated regularly in the school.

Looking at individual family actions in Appendix B, a majority of parents had participated in parents' evenings whenever possible, mothers more frequently than fathers (p = .024). Most parents also seemed happy to participate in school activities, although fathers were less enthusiastic than mothers (p = .003). Also, parents with the lowest level of education participated less in school activities (p = .004). If the school were to offer parents more possibilities to participate in their child's school day, over half of the parents expressed their willingness to do so. The higher the level of education of the parents, the more they were willing to participate in their child's school day (p = .003). Parents were unsure whether their children were invited to parents' evenings, as over half of them were not sure or answered the question negatively. Nearly half of

the parents stated that their family had too limited time to participate in school events. However, nearly 40% of the parents were willing to participate more if the school would offer more opportunities for doing so. Finally, when asked if their own child would not want parents to come to school during the school day, less than one-third answered affirmatively to that question, and one-fifth of the parents were unsure about their child's opinion.

The parents were asked with an open-ended question which function(s) of the school they liked. A total of 63 parents (34%) answered the question, and many parents wrote several issues (92 mentions total). The most common answers were parents' evenings (22 mentions), parent–teacher conferences (17 mentions), and school procedures, including, for example, prevention of bullying or the students' opportunity to eat healthy snacks (14 mentions). Parents were also asked why they do not attend school activities, and 11 of them (6%) answered. The reasons for not participating in school activities were due to work, child care problems, nothing "new" to offer, no time, and another family member's active participation. When class teachers were asked about the role of parents in the school community, one of them answered:

> It has changed over the years—even more to the point that a teacher outlines it—we have been anxious to show [to parents] that we can take care of teaching here…parents have their own jobs; we have our own... they have no time, and we have no time.

The common activity shared by all the class teachers was informing parents about different kinds of happenings. Teachers did not especially encourage parents to participate in the activities of the school community. Class teachers in one school admitted that the principal was not visible at the class level and the principal's work was somewhat unknown to pupils: "Once I gave the pupils an opportunity to interview our school personnel. Many pupils wanted to interview the principal, who does not have much contact with pupils." The teachers continued: "It feels that these days the principal's role is too often collaboration with the home in negative matters." The class teachers' interviews also revealed the teachers' strong caregiving tasks now:

> I remember someone saying that teaching should be divided into 70% at school and 30% at home, and caregiving vice versa. But the childrearing task—30% at school—is way too small a number today. Sometimes it feels most of the time is spent in caring for the children.

One principal described the "Welcome to the school" phrase as polite rhetoric. Parents' visits were not necessarily expected for more than regular events, such as bringing the child to school, parents' evenings, or celebrations. Individual pupils' problematic cases were, however, taken care of very effectively.

When parents were invited to school for special occasions, it was done with very sincere thought. The other principal admitted that direct communication between the principal and a pupil happens mostly when something negative has happened. The principals themselves would like to be with the pupils more and saw meeting with the pupils as important, but they saw no possibility to do that because of the lack of time. The task of administration has multiplied in recent years, as has dealing with pupils' problematic cases. One principal said, "Sometimes I had a dream that I could visit all the classes and, for example, teach one hour in each—at this moment there is no possibility of doing that."

To sum up the role of parents and teachers, the teacher is assumed to take care of education and childrearing at school with the consciousness that the caregiver or parent has the main responsibility for the child. The task is done together, even though mutual collaboration is not goal-oriented.

Interaction and Collaboration Between Class Teachers and Parents

Most of the parents, mothers more than fathers (p = .002), felt it was easy to converse with the class teacher. Parents also agreed that the teacher is the key person in building collaboration between home and school. Many parents thought the teacher showed interest towards the parents, although fathers were more unsure of that than mothers (21.8% vs. 5.7%). Mothers agreed more than fathers (p = .002) that the teacher's language was understandable (i.e., teachers did not use much professional jargon). Over half of the parents said they were invited to school also at times other than parents' evenings. When asked whether the teacher had presented different ways to participate in school activities during the school day, about a quarter of the fathers and less than half of the mothers agreed, with a significant difference (p = .004). Moreover, the higher the level of education among the parents, the more they agreed with the question (p = .007). In the parents' opinion, both genders equally, the teacher had not proposed to parents different ways to participate in the classroom during the school day. Most of the parents would like to continue collaboration with the class teacher at the same level while the child is growing. The "oldest" group of parents was most willing to let collaboration decrease as the child grew older (p = .043). Overall, the majority of parents thought interaction between teachers and parents could be increased (see Appendix C).

Most of the parents thought teachers contacted the home in multiple ways, but fewer parents stated that the contacts were on a regular basis. Class teachers had given advice to parents on how to support their child in doing homework (59%) or in preparing for tests (50.3%), more frequently to mothers than to fathers (p = .002 in both). Over half of the parents felt they could contact the teacher in the evening or on weekends, less among the highest education group (p = .024).

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and numbers of observations of parents in estimating the teacher's activities (rows 1–5 and 7–8) and their own participation in their child's school day (row 6). Overall, according to this table, the most used method of collaboration between the class teacher and parents was getting a report from the teacher about their child's success in schoolwork (M = 2.61; SD = 0.83), and the lowest rates were obtained for asking the parents to participate in planning schoolwork (M = 1.07; SD = 0.37) or school events (M = 1.22; SD = 0.58). The parents also reported that their participation in their children's school day had been very rare (M = 1.22; SD = 0.60), which is indicated by the lowest category "never." It is also notable that none of these methods described below received a mean score over 3, which was indicated as "once a semester." Compared to mothers, fathers were asked less to participate in planning schoolwork (p = .033).

Table 3. Frequency of Home–School Relationship by Parents

How often	M	SD	*n*	*p-value (gender)*
…has the teacher told you how your child is doing at school?	2.61	0.83	183	ns
…has the teacher organized a parents' conference or other discussion with your family?	2.38	0.78	182	ns
…has the teacher given your child homework that involves you?	2.18	1.08	180	ns
…has the teacher asked how your family is doing?	2.03	1.02	181	ns
…has the teacher been present at events organized for your child's class?	2.00	1.05	172	ns
… have you participated in schoolwork at your child's school during the school day?	1.22	0.60	180	ns
…has the teacher asked you to participate in planning school events?	1.22	0.58	183	.033*
…has the teacher asked you to participate in planning schoolwork?	1.07	0.37	183	ns

ns = nonsignificant; *p < .05

Note: The options range from 5 = once a week or more often, 4 = a couple of times a month, 3 = once a semester, 2 = once a year, 1 = never

According to the teachers, collaboration between teachers and parents happened mainly through individual contacts based on distribution of information or on the occasion of problems arising. Parent–teacher conferences were held differently at the schools; at one school conferences were offered only in the

lower grades (1–2) and in Grade 7, but at the other one parent–teacher conferences were offered once a year in Grades 1–7. Teachers also noted, in their own classes, the role of the parent was "mainly bringing some things to school that a child has forgotten, maybe seeing them popping in and going out."

From the principal's point of view, the parents' visibility was low: "They bring and get the smallest pupils, but they stop at the door. Parents do not come into the classroom." The principal continued by stating that home–school collaboration between the class teacher and parents depends on both the teacher and the parents. There are classes where everything is in order, and classes where the best way would be to start over. The question is about collaboration, "growing together." Both principals thought the teachers' time spent in collaboration is continuously growing. If collaboration is not pursued, it will be reflected later somehow. Home–school collaboration is a very essential part of the teacher's job. "We have tried to keep the 'threshold low' for parents. Still, we have parents who have a high threshold to contacting the school. They remember their own times at school; the teacher was an authority who was not supposed to be bothered for minor matters."

For teachers, preservice education had not prepared them enough to handle difficult situations with parents or, generally, home–school collaboration:

> Obviously, it is assumed that we get along without that part of education [home–school collaboration/interaction]; it is a surprise for new teachers when they enter "this world." Especially as a new teacher, you have to follow what the others are doing, and it really demands much work.

To sum up the interaction and collaboration between class teachers and parents, in addition to "traditional" contacts, teachers meet the parents only occasionally. According to the parents, teachers are the key persons in creating collaboration, and parents are also willing to increase collaboration. The fathers' role in the school community is quite minimal.

Discussion

Most of the parents were happy to participate in school activities, but they were not used to coming to school other than on occasions when they were invited, nor were they encouraged to take a more active role in the school community, at least at the classroom level. The parents described the reasons for low participation in school events as having to work in the evenings, lack of child care, or that the school had nothing "new" to offer. The absence of parents was revealed also in the pupils' answers; they hoped to see their parents or other adults more often in the school community. This finding confirms previous Finnish studies on home–school collaboration which revealed parents

genuinely participated in school activities, but did not take or were not allowed to take an active role (Metso, 2004; Siniharju, 2003). Furthermore, the activity level depended on the occasion. A few teachers in the study by Siniharju (2003) were also worried about some parents' disinterest towards their child's schooling, which Johnson, Pugach, and Hawkins (2004) also bring out as a wider problem of parental disinterest towards the whole school system. However, in Finnish society, attitudes towards education in general have traditionally and continuously been positive (Kyrö & Nyyssolä, 2006).

Contrary to Docket and Perry (2004) and one of the principals interviewed in this study, parents did not bring out that they do not want to come to the school because of their own memories from school. Many of them seemed to know very well what is happening at their child's school, which may imply a good flow of information from the teachers. On the other hand, it may also imply a carrying on of customary ways of doing things, which may also be one reason for feelings of insecurity among parents (Ben-Arieh, McDonell, & Attar-Schwartz, 2008). Furthermore, many traditional methods of collaboration, such as the parents' evenings, may have presented new challenges in knowing how to act currently. For example, the parents in this study were unsure whether they have permission to bring the children of the family to the parents' evenings, or they reported that child care problems decreased their participation at school events. This implies a lack of extended family structures now (grandparents in the same household or at least living near the family). Moreover, single-parent families probably face the problem of child care even more if the school has not offered the option of bringing the children to parents' evenings, as Carlyon et al. (1998) and Johnson et al. (2004) suggest. Also, the "oldest" group of parents in this study was most willing to lessen collaboration with the school as the child grows up (see also Yun & Kusum, 2008). Possibly these parents had participated in similar events before, and they felt the information was repeated. The schools have to critically view and refresh their methods of collaboration to better meet the needs of today's families.

The students in this study had positive attitudes towards parental participation, but many of them did not have a clear opinion on it. This is not surprising, taking into account that parents are a rarity in the school environment, at least during the ordinary school day. In contrast with the U.S., for example, where parents are often more involved in their child's learning (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2007), the Finnish educational system is largely built on teachers' professionalism and independence in the classroom. Compared internationally, Finnish teachers have many opportunities to influence their own work (Kumpulainen, 2009). Obviously, the children generally like parental participation, but also play an important role in stimulating or

curbing it (Vyverman & Vettenburg, 2009). Similarly, Deslandes and Bertrand (2006) found that if parents perceived that teachers and students (Grades 7–9) expected or desired their involvement, it motivated parents to actually be more involved in their children's schooling.

To enhance connectedness between home and school, interaction between them should be regular. The parents in this study considered parent–teacher conferences important and would like to see the discussions between them, the teacher, and the student continue through grades 1–9, which is normally not the case in Finnish schools. In fact, Peltonen and Kalkkinen (2008) bring out that less than half of the Finnish comprehensive schools regularly organize parent–teacher conferences in Grades 7–9. The parents in this study were also willing to embrace a variety of methods of home–school collaboration which forms an excellent base for continuing the development of the health context in the school community. For example, Michael, Dittus, and Epstein (2007) have been applying Epstein's categories of involvement (e.g., Epstein et al., 2002) in the health context, which presents many options for enriching parental involvement at schools. The suggestions are well adaptable to this study: in order to achieve and maintain a good relationship between parents and the school, the inclusive components related to health could include, for example, opportunities to participate in school health programs, involving families in health education learning activities at home, or involving parents in the development of school health policies (Michael et al., 2007).

The principals cautiously brought out that home–school collaboration should be developed, but eventually backed off the idea by listing inhibitory arguments in another sentence. Parental involvement should, however, be seen as subservient to both parties. For example, according to Kyriakides (2005), parents who actively take part in their child's schoolwork get more involved in their child's learning process and follow the school's procedures at home, also. This, in turn, helps the teacher with the childrearing task, which in this study—as in earlier Finnish studies (Kumpulainen, 2009)—was seen by the teachers as having increased. One class teacher in this study brought out the clear distinction between the tasks of home and school. Similar results were obtained in a study where parent involvement was investigated from elementary through high school (Ferrara, 2009) in which the teachers' view of "adding" responsibilities like parent involvement was seen as taking their time from teaching the students. It seems, as Ferrara (2009) indicates, that teachers and principals value parental involvement and basically acknowledge its benefits, but it still is not a high priority in the school community, even at a national level. The role of parents or collaboration has not even been mentioned in explaining the PISA success among Finnish adolescents (e.g., Kupiainen et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the position of the father, in particular, seems to be unclear in the school community. According to this study, fathers felt it was more difficult to discuss issues with their child's teacher, and they also had more difficulties in understanding the teacher's professional language than mothers did. Moreover, compared with mothers, fathers also often felt they had gotten less advice about their child's homework or preparing for tests or invitations to plan school events. Fathers' involvement in schoolwork has been noted to be mainly marginal and supplementary to mothers' involvement, even though fathers' participation has been found to promote the child's learning, as McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Ho (2005) and Tam (2009) point out. The school culture seems to be more favorable toward mothers than fathers, even though the school should be the arena of both parents. The reasons for fathers' lesser activity should be investigated, and their participation in their child's schoolwork should be enhanced, even though the child's schooling has traditionally been more the task of mothers than fathers (e.g., Tam, 2009). According to a study by Torkkeli (2001), fathers who had talked personally with the child's teacher also had a significantly more positive view towards home–school collaboration than did fathers with no experience of discussion. In addition, personal discussion with the teacher was the thing that fathers desired most from schools.

In the opinion of the parents in this study, the teacher is the key person in building collaboration between home and school. However, as the findings show, class teachers seem to receive very little education in the areas of home–school collaboration or talking with parents. Teachers reported that the first year of teaching had been especially difficult, as the skills had to be built in real situations with families, following the example of others. This finding is similar to research by Uludag (2008), in which preservice teachers had learned the importance of communication only after they had started their actual work as teachers, or the findings of Fantilli and McDougall (2009), who found insecurity, inexperience, and lack of preparation had been the sentiments regarding communication with parents for new teachers in their first years of teaching. According to the current study, teachers, regardless of their teaching experience, equally valued collaboration between home and school.

Limitations

There are some limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed regarding the present study. Due to the purposeful sampling of the study schools, the criteria for the selected schools highlighted their willingness to participate in the development project, and therefore this may have influenced some of the answers of the personnel, although the interviews were held before the

development project had formally started. Secondly, the number of schools in this study is too limited for broad generalizations. However, nearly all Finnish children and adolescents (Grades 1–9) go to public schools (private schools under 3%, homeschooling under 1%) whose teacher qualifications are equal and where learning is based on the National Core Curriculum of Basic Education. Therefore, other Finnish schools are able to benefit from our findings when developing home–school collaboration.

The background of the families in this study was quite similar due to the study environment in a relatively small area of eastern Finland. Further empirical evaluations are needed to replicate the study in larger cities or in other parts of Finland where the background of families varies more. In addition, although the parents' socioeconomic status was not asked directly in the questionnaire, their level of education and current working status were asked in order to get a rough estimation of the participating families' socioeconomic background. According to the findings, parents with the lowest level of education participated less in school activities and vice versa: the more education the parents had, the more willing they were to participate in their own child's school day.

Finally, although the response rate of the parents' survey was average (53%), it is possible that the non-respondents of the survey may have had different outcomes than the parents who did participate in the study. In addition, the total number of possible respondents turned out to be extremely difficult to calculate, as the families differed (e.g., stepparents, etc.) and two copies of the questionnaires were sent to all the pupils' homes in case one of the parents did not get the questionnaire initially. Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution by examining home–school collaboration in the Finnish education context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study clearly showed that Finnish pupils are taken care of in the school community, but the possibilities to support the children's healthy growth collectively with families are only partly developed. Therefore, based on the findings above, the following recommendations are provided for parents, teachers, and other school personnel:

- Schools (and wider: school districts and national policy) should emphasize parents' responsibility for their children's education.
- Schools should develop their environments as places where family involvement is welcome, well structured, and well supported.
- Preservice teacher education (as well as in-service training of teachers) in home–school issues should be examined and further developed.

- Appropriate teaching methods, such as simulation-assisted learning, should be used more in teacher education to improve the communication skills of future teachers.
- A novice teachers' mentoring system should be established in schools.
- Tested models and the latest research on home–school collaboration and partnerships should be utilized in all teacher education regardless of teachers' working site or grade level.
- Education on family structures should be offered to school personnel.
- Collaboration with the home should start at the beginning of school and continue throughout the child's school path.
- To achieve high quality in home–school collaboration, the whole school approach (e.g., health promoting school approach) should be implemented and personnel commitment obtained.
- The goals and strategies of home–school collaboration should be formulated together with families, described in the school's policy, and made visible in everyday life.
- The principal's important role in promoting home–school collaboration should be noted and appropriate education provided.

Suggestions for Future Research

To determine the most effective strategies on how children's health learning can be supported by home–school collaboration, future studies (a) should take into account all the environments (e.g., home, school, peers, media) where the children learn about health now, and try to find the most effective methods for support in those environments; (b) need to look at how parent involvement (in education and also in health issues) changes as the child ages and why; (c) should focus on finding out the characteristics of today's demanding society, including high demands of achievement for children and their parents at school and at work (that is reflected in collaboration); (d) should attempt to identify the limited teacher, principal, or other personnel knowledge of alternative strategies for increasing effective home–school collaboration; and (e) should explore the pupils' own experiences and opinions about learning and health in the most effective ways. Additionally, the research methods should include a variety of different approaches to cover the phenomenon broadly enough. For example, mixed methods involving qualitative and quantitative approaches allows the achievement of a wide and deep interpretation of the current situation, and an approach of action research enables the involvement of all stakeholders in the development process.

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Marjorita Sormunen is a doctoral student and a researcher. Her research interests are school health promotion, health partnership between home and

school, and health education. She is a Fulbright alumna of University of Florida, Department of Health Education and Behavior (2010-2011). Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Marjorita Sormunen, University of Eastern Finland, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing Science, P.O. Box 1627, 70211 Kuopio, Finland, or email marjorita.sormunen@uef.fi

Kerttu Tossavainen is a professor in the Department of Nursing Science, University of Eastern Finland. Head of the research group, she has extensive experience in intervention and action research in different school communities in her special field, health promotion with children, families, and school nurses. She has worked with the Eastern Finland Youth Project, the National Healthy School Project, the European Network of Health Promoting Schools (ENHPS), and since 2007, the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE).

Hannele Turunen, a professor and head of the Department of Nursing Science, University of Eastern Finland, has expertise in both health promotion and health pedagogies. She has been a member of the ENHPS partnership since 1997 (in cooperation with Kerttu Tossavainen), the Finnish Centre for Health Promotion, and a member of the SHE international research group.

Appendices

Appendix A. Parents' Opinions on General Collaboration of Home and School

Parents' Opinions	Fathers (n = 78)	Mothers (n = 106)	Total (n = 184)	p
	%	%	%	
Collaboration between home and school is important				.097
Agree	97.4	100.0	*98.8*	
Cannot say	1.3	0.0	*0.6*	
Disagree	1.3	0.0	*0.6*	
Parents' evenings are necessary				.789
Agree	96.1	95.3	*95.6*	
Cannot say	1.3	0.9	*1.1*	
Disagree	2.6	3.8	*3.3*	
The principal's role is important when building the school atmosphere				.144
Agree	96.2	90.6	*92.9*	
Cannot say	2.5	8.5	*6.0*	
Disagree	1.3	0.9	*1.1*	
It is good that pupils meet adults other than school personnel at school				.466
Agree	87.2	90.6	*89.1*	
Cannot say	12.8	6.6	*9.3*	
Disagree	0.0	2.8	*1.6*	
	Appendix A continues next page			

Appendix A, continued from previous page				
Parents' conferences should continue through comprehensive school				.146
Agree	84.6	91.5	*88.6*	
Cannot say	7.7	4.7	*6.0*	
Disagree	7.7	3.8	*5.4*	
The school organizes enough parents' evenings				.480
Agree	75.6	80.0	*78.1*	
Cannot say	12.9	4.8	*8.2*	
Disagree	11.5	15.2	*13.7*	
The school is responsible for taking the initiative in home–school collaboration				.006*
Agree	67.1	84.6	*77.2*	
Cannot say	19.7	5.8	*11.7*	
Disagree	13.2	9.6	*11.1*	
Methods of home–school collaboration could be more versatile				.489
Agree	59.7	64.8	*62.6*	
Cannot say	28.6	17.1	*22.0*	
Disagree	11.7	18.1	*15.4*	
The school organizes enough whole-school activities for parents				.407
Agree	59.0	52.8	*55.4*	
Cannot say	21.8	8.5	*14.2*	
Disagree	19.2	38.7	*30.4*	
Parents are encouraged to take an active role in the school community				.481
Agree	37.6	42.9	*40.6*	
Cannot say	33.8	15.2	*23.1*	
Disagree	28.6	41.9	*36.3*	
The school organizes enough regular whole-family activities				.950
Agree	24.3	24.8	*24.6*	
Cannot say	37.2	22.8	*29.0*	
Disagree	38.5	52.4	*46.4*	
Home–school collaboration is evaluated regularly in my child's school				.168
Agree	23.1	15.1	*18.5*	
Cannot say	28.2	21.7	*24.5*	
Disagree	48.7	63.2	*57.0*	

Note: p-value, in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E) were all nonsignificant for these items.
*$p < .05$

Appendix B. Parents' Opinions of Their Own Participation/Role in the School Community

Parents' Opinions	Fathers (n = 78)	Mothers (n = 106)	Total (n = 184)	*p*	*p-value, if significant, in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E)*	
	%	%	%		B	E
I participate in my child's parents' night whenever possible				.024*	ns	ns
Agree	85.7	95.3	*91.3*			
Cannot say	2.6	0.9	*1.6*			
Disagree	11.7	3.8	*7.1*			
I gladly participate in school activities				.003*	ns	.004*
Agree	77.0	92.5	*85.9*			
Cannot say	17.9	0.0	*7.6*			
Disagree	5.1	7.5	*6.5*			
I could participate in my child's school day if it would be offered by the school				.075	ns	.003*
Agree	51.3	64.4	*58.8*			
Cannot say	30.8	16.3	*22.5*			
Disagree	17.9	19.3	*18.7*			
Our children are welcome to parents' evenings or other events targeted to parents				.116	ns	ns
Agree	55.1	43.4	*48.3*			
Cannot say	32.1	18.9	*24.5*			
Disagree	12.8	37.7	*27.2*			
Our family has too little time to participate in school events or activities				.586	ns	ns
Agree	47.4	43.4	*45.1*			
Cannot say	16.7	7.5	*11.4*			
Disagree	35.9	49.1	*43.5*			
I would participate in more school/class events if there were more opportunities offered by the school				.664	ns	ns
Agree	35.9	39.1	*37.7*			
Cannot say	37.2	27.6	*31.7*			
Disagree	26.9	33.3	*30.6*			
My child does not want me to come to school during the school day				.871	ns	ns
Agree	28.2	29.5	*29.0*			
Cannot say	32.1	20.0	*25.1*			
Disagree	39.7	50.5	*45.9*			

ns = nonsignificant; *$p < .05$

Appendix C. Parents' Opinions on Collaboration With Their Child's Teacher

Parents' Opinions	Fathers (n = 78)	Mothers (n = 106)	Total (n = 184)	p	*p-value, if it exists in backgrounds of year of birth (B) or education (E)*	
	%	%	%		B	E
Interaction and Collaboration with Parents						
I feel it is easy to discuss issues with my child's teacher				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	75.6	92.4	*85.2*			
Cannot say	19.2	1.0	*8.7*			
Disagree	5.2	6.6	*6.1*			
Collaboration with the school depends on the child's teacher				.694	ns	ns
Agree	80.8	83.1	*82.1*			
Cannot say	11.5	9.4	*10.3*			
Disagree	7.7	7.5	*7.6*			
My child's teacher shows us that she/he is interested in the parents				.084	ns	ns
Agree	66.7	78.1	*73.2*			
Cannot say	21.8	5.7	*12.6*			
Disagree	11.5	16.2	*14.2*			
The teacher explains school-related things understandably				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	60.3	81.0	*72.2*			
Cannot say	25.6	10.5	*16.9*			
Disagree	14.1	8.5	*10.9*			
Interaction between teachers and parents could be increased				.824	ns	ns
Agree	66.6	65.0	*65.7*			
Cannot say	24.4	14.2	*18.5*			
Disagree	9.0	20.8	*15.8*			
The teacher has welcomed parents to school at times other than parents' evenings				.091	ns	ns
Agree	47.4	60.0	*54.6*			
Cannot say	30.8	14.3	*21.3*			
Disagree	21.8	25.7	*24.1*			
The teacher has proposed different ways to participate in school activities				.004*	ns	.007*
Agree	25.6	46.6	*37.7*			
Cannot say	42.3	12.4	*25.1*			
Disagree	32.1	41.0	*37.2*			

Appendix C is continued on the next page

Appendix C, continued from previous page						
The teacher has proposed different ways to do things in the classroom during the school day				.362	ns	ns
Agree	14.1	19.2	*17.0*			
Cannot say	43.6	19.3	*29.7*			
Disagree	42.3	61.5	*53.3*			
Collaboration with the child's teacher can decrease when the child moves to Grades 5 and 6				.466	.043*	ns
Agree	12.8	9.4	*10.9*			
Cannot say	19.3	5.7	*11.4*			
Disagree	67.9	84.9	*77.7*			
Contacting and Advising the Parents						
The teacher contacts the home in diverse ways				.476	ns	ns
Agree	80.8	84.8	*83.1*			
Cannot say	5.1	2.9	*3.8*			
Disagree	14.1	12.3	*13.1*			
The teacher contacts the home regularly				.561	ns	ns
Agree	61.5	65.7	*63.9*			
Cannot say	16.7	4.8	*9.8*			
Disagree	21.8	29.5	*26.3*			
I have received advice on how to support my child in his/her homework				.002*	ns	.053*
Agree	46.2	68.6	*59.0*			
Cannot say	20.5	7.6	*13.1*			
Disagree	33.3	23.8	*27.9*			
I feel I can contact the teacher also in evenings or on week-ends				.681	ns	.024*
Agree	56.4	59.4	*58.2*			
Cannot say	23.1	8.5	*14.6*			
Disagree	20.5	32.1	*27.2*			
I have received advice on how to support my child in his/her test preparation				.002*	ns	ns
Agree	37.2	60.0	*50.3*			
Cannot say	20.5	6.7	*12.5*			
Disagree	42.3	33.3	*37.2*			
The teacher contacts the home mainly to deal with problems				.914	ns	ns
Agree	48.7	49.5	*49.2*			
Cannot say	10.3	11.4	*10.9*			
Disagree	41.0	39.1	*39.9*			

ns = nonsignificant; *$p < .05$