

THEORETICAL INSIGHTS AND PARENTS' VIEWS ABOUT FAMILY-SCHOOL COLLABORATION FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a mixed-method study aimed at identifying preconditions of effective family-school partnerships for implementing character education at school. The research questions were: 'What do parents think about the existence and quality of family-school collaboration for character education in Latvian schools? Which are the most/least common family-school relationship models and strategies for promoting effective family-school partnerships to implement character education at school in Latvia?' The theoretical background of the study provided a brief overview of existing theoretical (conceptual and processual) models of family-school relationships and parental involvement, and identified different strategies facilitating parental involvement and family-school collaboration in meaningful and effective ways. Parents' viewpoints ($N = 461$) were collected in 2019-2020 from all five regions of Latvia through an online questionnaire containing closed and open questions. Most parents believed that collaboration with the school for character education was good and fairly regular. The most commonly used family-school relationship model for character education was the curriculum enrichment model, where teachers and parents enhance mutual communication for improving the curriculum and providing a more family-friendly school climate. The least common model was the protective model, where parents are perceived as non-partners and outsiders. Improving two-sided family-school communication was instrumental for promoting effective partnerships.

Keywords: *character education, family-school relationship models, family-school partnership, parental involvement and engagement*

Introduction

Family-school collaboration and effective parental involvement are crucial elements of successful education (Baker & Soden, 1997; Barge & Loges, 2003; Daniela et al., 2021; Deslandes, 2019; Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Dusi, 2012; Jaiswal, 2017; Johnson et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, 2010; Larocque et al., 2011). In the Covid-19 pandemic

context, when the entire education system worldwide switched to remote learning, parents became key educational agents and needed collaboration with the school to support their children's learning (Daniela et al., 2021). According to the Sustainable development strategy of Latvia until 2030 (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 2010), the school as the centre of social networking should facilitate parental involvement in the study process; therefore, school leaders and teachers "should form a close link with parents of pupils" using different methods such as arranging parental rooms at school, organising courses and meetings for parents, etc. (ibid., p. 37).

While a lot of researchers and practitioners support this policy direction for increased parental involvement, little consensus exists about what is effective parental involvement (Baker & Soden, 1997), and the research in the field of parent involvement should "be strengthened by both a more consistent conceptualisation of parent involvement and its measurement at the empirical level" (ibid., p. 13). Family-school collaboration includes financial, emotional, motivational, instrumental, and also moral dimensions. Effective partnerships are based on an attitude of mutual trust and respect, and of shared responsibility for the education of children and young people at the school (The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008).

The philosophical background of this paper lays on virtue ethics, even if it can be argued that virtue ethics may be complemented with other approaches to moral growth in order to account for the richness of the persons' moral development (e. g., Scalzo et al., 2022). In a virtue ethics approach, character is defined as "a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct", and "character education includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues" (The Jubilee Centre, 2017, p. 2; for an introduction about the key ideas, practices and concepts that are shaping character education in schools today, see Watts et al., 2021).

In the field of pupils' moral education in Latvia, parental involvement at school is a topical and controversial issue. On the one side, parents can request explanations from teachers and school leaders regarding the materials or methods used for pupils' virtue education, which should be carried out in cooperation with parents (Cabinet of Ministers Guidelines for Pupils' Moral Education, 2016, point 8.2). On the other side, a number of teachers and school leaders believe that parents should not have such rights to question the educational materials chosen by the school. Those debates are often guided by different ideological positions and historical experiences, but there is not yet a sound scientific study regarding how

family-school collaboration happens and how educational actors, in particular families, understand what a fruitful relationship with the school for their children's moral development would look like.

In this context, the goal of this research was to explore the scientific literature regarding theoretical (conceptual and processual) models and strategies for family-school collaboration; and to investigate the current status of family-school collaboration for character education, and the preconditions of effective family-school partnerships for implementing character education at school in Latvia.

Theoretical framework

The concepts of parental involvement (school-directed) and parental engagement (parent-directed) in schooling are multidimensional (Campbell et al., 2016; Deslandes, 2019; Jaiswal, 2017; Larocque et al., 2011). These concepts address family-school collaboration and include financial, emotional, motivational and instrumental support, as well as parent-child-teacher interactions and communication in at least two contexts: at home (e. g., guiding, discussing, helping, encouraging, monitoring of schoolwork, teaching children to develop positive attitudes and pro-school behaviours); and at school (e. g., volunteering, attending workshops, meetings, conferences, sharing expertise through guest speaking, participating in the decision-making process). Barge and Loges (2003) identified some helpful forms of parental involvement and engagement based on opinions of students (e. g., helping with homework), teachers (e. g., involving in child's school life, supporting school upbringing measures), and parents (e. g., cultivating relationships with teachers, monitoring student's academic progress).

In this section, the existing theoretical models of family-school collaboration will be presented first, and then the practical strategies promoting family-school collaboration and recent research about family-school collaboration for character education will be addressed.

Models of family-school collaboration

Multiple theoretical (conceptual and processual) models of family-school relationships and parental involvement are identified, analysed and/or described in research (Auerbach, 2010; Campbell et al., 2016; Cunningham & Davis, 1985; Dale, 1996; Deslandes, 2019; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby, 2011; Lueder, 2000; Swap, 1993). Those models are defined by different sets of assumptions regarding the goals of, and strategies and approaches for, establishing a family-school relationship, and the understanding of teachers' and parents' roles (see Figure 1).

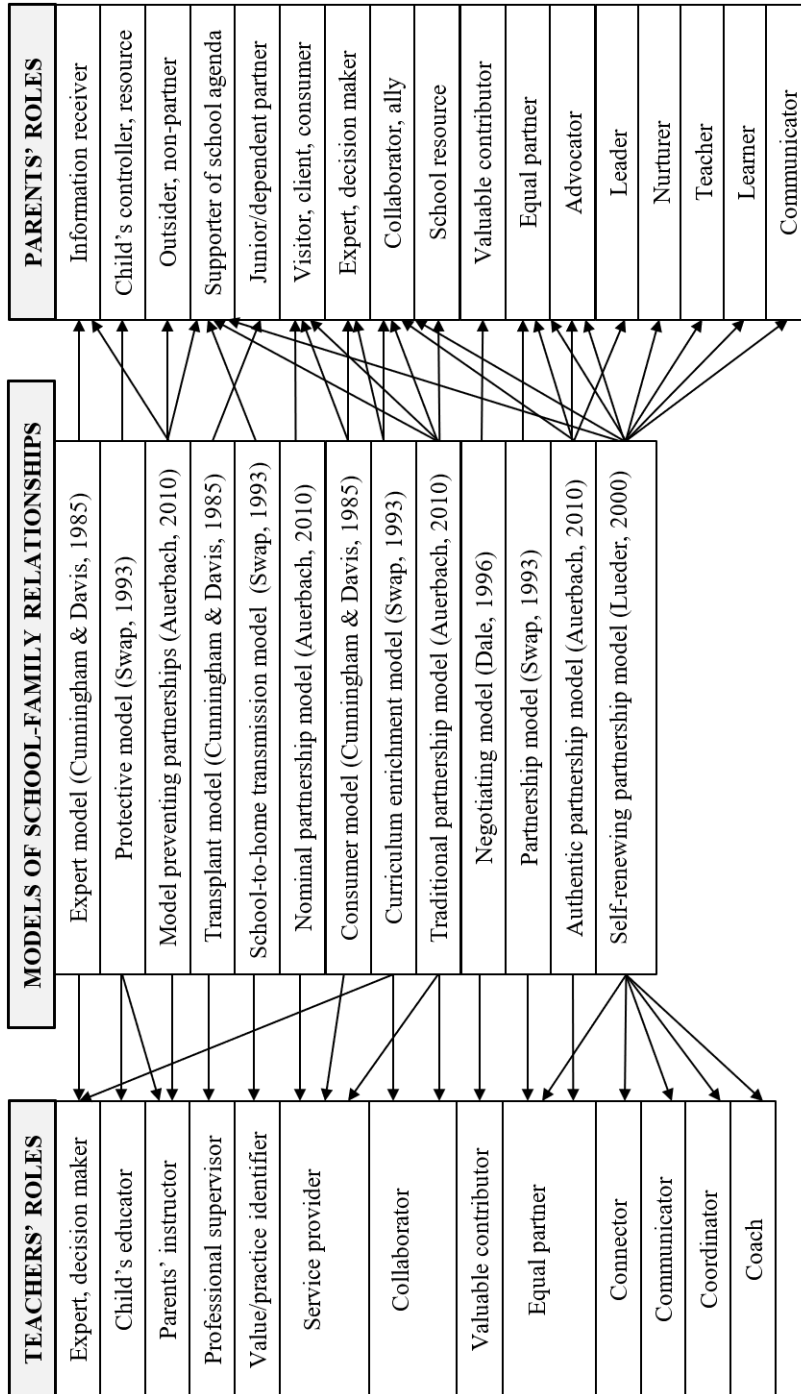


Figure 1. Models of relationships between school and family: Parents' and teachers' roles (developed by the authors)

These models of parental involvement at school range from those that attempt to avoid or to minimize parental involvement ('Parents as outsiders and intruders', 'Parents as visitors, clients') to those that actively support and facilitate it ('Parents as supporters, resources', 'Parents as allies, leaders'). For instance, Cunningham and Davis (1985) explored different models (i. e., the 'teacher-expert', 'transplant' and 'parent-consumer') in reference to teachers' professional understanding of the nature of relationships with families and their "behaviour, which is partly determined by the way professionals view their role in relation to parents" (p. 10). Lueder (2000) proposed a powerful conceptual framework for creating true partnerships between family and school: the 'self-renewing partnership model', which is based on the concepts of 'energy-in' (i. e., acknowledging and integrating in the partnership the parents' roles as nurturers, communicators, teachers, learners, supporters, advocates, and collaborators for supporting their children and schools), and 'energy-out' (i. e., involving schools to support families using strategies for connecting, communicating, coordinating and coaching families).

Swap (1993) draws important distinctions regarding how different approaches hinder or promote full family-school partnership (i. e., the protective model, the school-to-home transmission model, the curriculum enrichment model, and the partnership model). Swap's set of models (1993) is in line with Auerbach's proposed continuum (2010) for understanding various approaches to leadership for creating school-family partnerships (i. e., preventive, nominal, traditional and authentic). Because of their conceptual clarity, Swap's and Auerbach's models were used as a lens for analysing parents' views (see Table 3, codes 1–4).

Strategies for promoting family-school collaboration

Effective family-school partnerships are multi-level, complex social realities (Dusi, 2012), which imply establishing collaborative relationships and organising activities which involve school staff, parents, and other family members (The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008). This family-school collaboration includes "both an attitude and an activity in which student interest is at the centre of concern" and "refers to family responsibilities and the school's role in updating parents' participation in school monitoring" (Deslandes, 2019, p. 12).

A number of contributions for identifying the strategies that promote parental involvement and facilitate family-school collaboration in a more appropriate, meaningful, and effective way have been put forward (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein et al., 2002; Jaiswal, 2017; Johnson et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby, 2011; Larocque et al., 2011; Smit et al., 2007; Tett & Macleod, 2020; The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008, 2018).

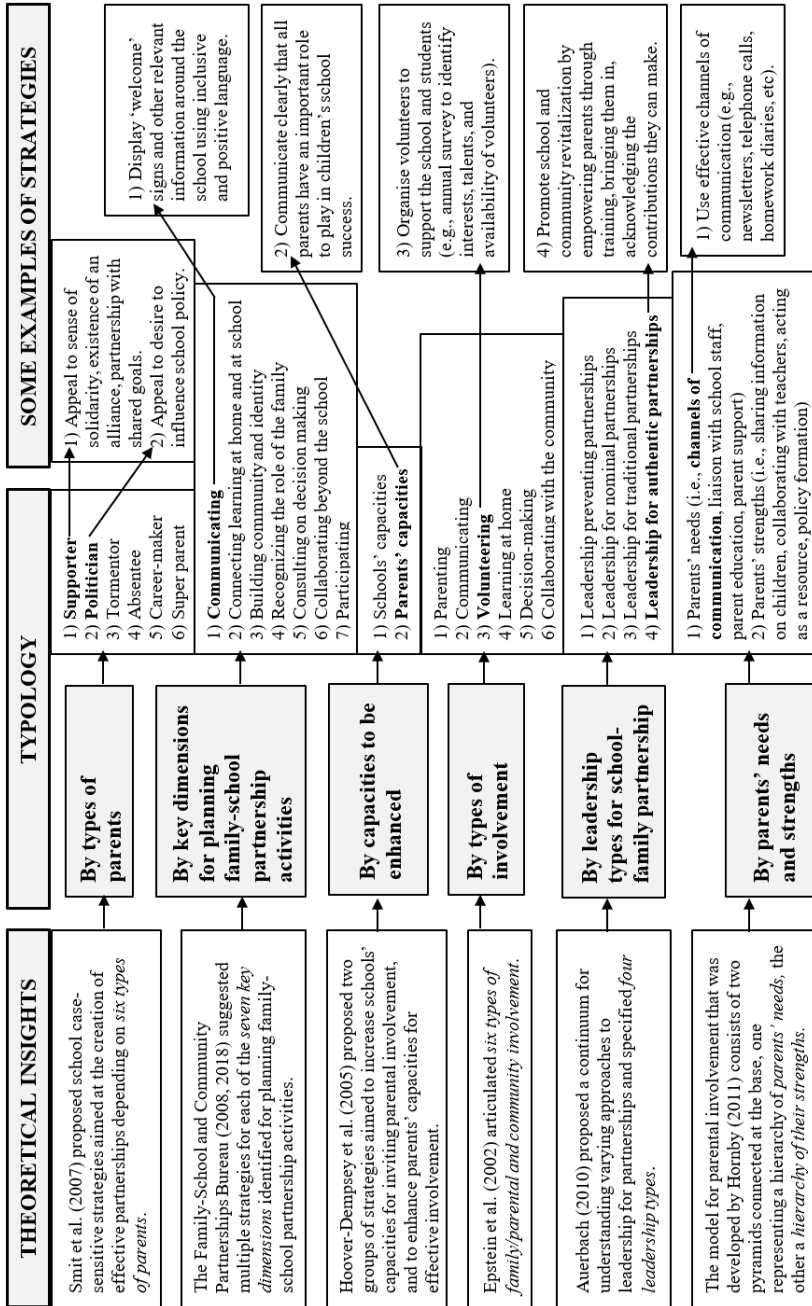


Figure 2. A typology of strategies aimed at the creation of effective partnerships between school and family (developed by the authors)

Researchers have described those strategies using different sets of criteria (see a typology in Figure 2), such as the types of parents involved (Smit et al., 2007), the key dimensions of partnership activities (Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008, 2018), the capacities to be enhanced in parents and at school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), the types of family/parental and community involvement (Epstein et al., 2002), the types of leadership in school-family partnerships (Auerbach, 2010), and the hierarchisation of parental needs and of their strengths or possible contributions (Hornby, 2011). However, there is no generally accepted model of parental involvement and participation in contemporary school system (Đurišić & Bunijevec, 2017). In this research, Epstein et al. (2002) types of parental involvement, namely, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community, were used as a lens for analysing parents' views (see Table 3, codes 5–10).

Family-school collaboration for character education

In the field of character education, which is “not a slogan or a course but a mission that is embedded in the everyday school life” (Agboola & Tsai, 2012, p. 168), including online education (Harrison et al., 2022), it is necessary to create effective partnerships between school and family/community to encourage students to acquire good virtues and manifest good values in their lives (Agboola & Tsai, 2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Berkowitz et al., 2008, 2017; Epstein et al., 2002). Whilst parents are the primary educators of their children's character, including in online settings (Harrison, 2021), “empirical research tells us that parents want all adults who have contact with their children to contribute to such education, especially their children's teachers” (The Jubilee Centre, 2017, p. 1). A poll conducted in UK in 2017 (Parent-Teacher Association, 2017) showed that teachers believe parental engagement has many positive effects in children character, including improved behaviour (59%) and developing a shared school ethos (53%).

According to Berkowitz and Bier (2006), active family and/or community involvement in character education is a common strategy which “includes parents as consumers (i. e., offering training to parents) and parents and community as partners (i. e., including them in the design and delivery of the character education initiative)” (p. 19).

In this sense, Epstein et al. (2002) proposed some strategies for improving students' behaviour and character working with families:

1. Parenting: Parent-to-parent group meetings on student behaviour, age-appropriate discipline, and related topics.

2. Communicating: Student-of-the-month assembly, bulletin board, and luncheon with family partners to recognize students for good or improved behaviour, character, and citizenship.
3. Volunteering: Volunteers for school patrols in hallways, in the cafeteria, on the playground, or in other locations to increase or maintain students' good behaviour.
4. Learning at home: Monthly interactive homework assignments for students to talk with parents or other family partners about selected character traits, values, and behaviours.
5. Decision-making: Sponsored speaker series for parents on student development, with mental health, medical, and other specialists.
6. Collaborating with the community: Community connections with students on problem-solving and conflict resolution skills to reduce bullying and other problem behaviours (p. 192).

However, in spite of this theoretical awareness, "educators often lament the fact that the academic and character lessons from school are not reinforced at home", and it seems that "parent training is a common element in character education that can address this concern" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006, p. 8).

Recently, several efforts have been done in this direction. The character education evaluation handbook for schools (Harrison et al., 2015) provides guidance and tools for schools' self-evaluation to improve their character education provision, contains a set of criteria for assessing parental involvement in the character education project (under the section 'Whole school community') according to four levels (namely, focusing, developing, establishing, and enhancing), with descriptors of achievement for each level, ranging from parents' awareness of the school's ethos and key character virtues (focusing level) and supporting the school efforts at home (developing), to parents' modelling the school virtues themselves (establishing), and engaging in further development of the school provision for character education (enhancing). Key assessment questions address the channels for parental information (newsletters, e-mails) and the help the school provides to parents (parenting programs).

In the United States, the '11 Principles of Effective Character Education' elaborated by the association Character.org¹, which are intended to support schools in establishing a comprehensive character development initiative, explicitly include parental involvement in their principle No 10: 'The school engages families and community as partners in the character initiative':

Schools of character involve families. Parents are encouraged to reinforce the school's core values at home. School leaders regularly

¹ <https://www.character.org/11-principles-framework>

update families about character-inspired goals and activities (via newsletters, emails, family nights, parent workshops, the school website, and parent conferences). To build greater trust between home and school, school leaders reach out and encourage parents and family members to be involved in the work of the school's Character Committee.

The awareness of the importance of parental involvement in character education is also reflected in research. For example, the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire – SDQ (www.sdqinfo.org), in addition to a self-report questionnaire about character strengths for children, includes a version of the questionnaire for parents (to complete on behalf of a young person) to be triangulated with pupils' self-reports. Practitioners are also contributing to parental involvement in character education. For example, the guide 'The families as partners'², created in the frame of the Lions Quest programs 'Skills for Growing' (for early learners through Grade 5) and 'Skills for Adolescence' (for Grades 6–8), provides information and resources to lead parent meetings and enhancing parental involvement in this character education program; and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has also produced a number of activities for discussing virtues with children at home³ in ways that relate to their lives, helping them to talk and think about how they feel, as well as how they act in relation to moral situations and emotions. Recently, a multifactorial model of family-school partnership for character education, based on the analysis of factors influencing family-school collaboration and preconditions for effective partnerships for character education, has been put forward (Surikova & Fernández González, in press).

In the Law of Education of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 1997), the school-family collaboration in pupils' education is addressed quite formally. School should inform parents about school truancy (No 14, 35), and parents should be in majority in the School Council (No 31, 1.2), which is led by a parent (No 31, 2). They also have the right 'to give and receive information about issues related to children moral and academic education' (No 57, 4). The modalities of family-school collaboration in the field of moral education is described more concretely in the Cabinet of Ministers Guidelines for Pupils' Moral Education (2016): pupils' moral education shall be performed in cooperation with pupils' parents (or legal caregivers) and their family (No 8.2). In addition, parents (or caregivers) have the right to ask the teacher a reasoned explanation (justification) regarding the appropriateness of the information, educational tool,

² <https://www.lions-quest.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Families-as-Partners.pdf>

³ <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1777/character-education/parent-resources>

materials, or methods used (No 21) and, if the explanation does not satisfy them, they have the right to refer to the head of the educational institution with a justified request to evaluate the information into question. The head of the educational institution, independently or in co-operation with other teachers or with the School Council, shall evaluate the request and take a decision (No 22). Parents (caregivers) also have the right to directly address the School Council about these issues (No 23). In this case, the School Council takes a recommendatory decision by a majority and submits it to the head of the educational institution, who takes the final decision.

However, the Soviet heritage in character education (Kestere & Fernández González, 2021) can still be felt in Latvia. During Communist character education, it was commonly accepted that “the ideology-driven political and moral upbringing at school [...] should be concentrated in the hands of the principal” (Klēģeris, 1962, p. 59). After the falling of Soviet Union, school directors’ formal authority increased, and the school’s role as a place for pupils’ moral upbringing was reinforced (Fernández-González, 2020; Surikova & Fernández-González, 2021). Among teachers, a tendency to consider themselves as experts who look with some mistrust at parental involvement in school settings, can still be perceived. The school role in moral education is also reinforced by a social context, in which more than half of children live in broken families and where many parents are too busy earning money due to the low wages.

This historical, cultural, and legislative background makes even more urgent the empiric exploration of the current status of family-school collaboration for character education and the preconditions of effective family-school partnerships for implementing character education at school in Latvia. To address this research goal, the following research questions were put forward: What do parents think about the existence and quality of family-school collaboration for character education at Latvian schools? Which are the most/least common family-school relationship models and strategies for promoting effective family-school partnerships to implement character education at school in Latvia?

To address these research questions, this empirical study focusses on parents’ voices, recognising the convenience of including parents in character education research, given parents’ unique perspectives regarding their children’s character growth (Fernández González & Surikova, 2022).

Methodology

Research tool, sampling and data collection

An online questionnaire was used for collecting data including both open and closed-ended questions to obtain qualitative and quantitative

data. The questionnaire was administrated online in two steps: 1) from March to May 2018 – to 190 respondents in Riga city, the capital of Latvia, within the Erasmus+ project ‘Arete Catalyst’; and 2) from June till November 2018 – to 271 respondents from all Latvian regions within the first stage of the postdoctoral research ‘Arete-school’ (Fernández-González, 2019). Respondents were approached through regional educational authorities, family associations and personal contacts. Overall, 461 parents participated in this research. Regarding the demographics, respondents were between 27 and 71 years old ($M = 40.95$, $SD = 6.25$). The majority of participants (88.9%) were females. All five planning regions of Latvia were represented as follows: 41.4% from Riga city and Riga region, 17.4% from Latgale, 13.7% from Kurzeme, 8.5% from Vidzeme and 19.1% from Zemgale.

Data processing and analysis methods

The respondents were asked if the school collaborated with them for shaping children’s character (Question Q-1. Options – Yes/No). And then, according to their answer, an open question asked them to share their good experiences or expectations in the field, respectively (Q-2) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Qualitative and quantitative data processing and analysis methods

Question formulation	Data processing and analysis methods
Q-1: Does the school collaborate with you as parents in the field of shaping your children’s character? Please choose one option: A or B!	Crosstabs statistics, Chi-square test of independence, Z-test & Bonferroni method.
Q-2: [if A: Rather yes, collaboration is good and fairly regular in this field]. Can you share your good experience? Please describe it! [if B: Rather no, collaboration does not take place or is very rare in this field]. What else do you expect from school in this field? Please share your suggestions for better collaboration!	Open coding, thematic analysis, code frequency analysis

The quantitative data (Question Q-1) processing and analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Crosstabulation was used to display a breakdown of the quantitative data, to create contingency tables, which describe the interaction between two nominal variables. Via Crosstabs, Chi-square test of independence was performed to determine if there was a significant relationship between two categorical variables, Z-test was employed to compare column proportions and Bonferroni method was used to adjust the significance values. The qualitative data (open-ended

question) were processed and analysed using NVivo software, applying thematic analysis with pre-set coding scheme. In total, textual data of 4657 words were analysed to identify segments of meaning; and each segment of meaning was referenced under a code. The pre-set codebook consisted of 10 codes based on Swap's (1993) and Auerbach's (2010) family-school partnership models (Table 3, codes 1–4) and on Epstein's et al. (2002) parental involvement strategies (Table 3, codes 5–10).

Results

What do parents think about the existence and quality of a family-school collaboration for character education at Latvian schools?

Answering to the Question Q-1, 64.1% of parents confirmed that the school collaborated with them, and they thought that collaboration was good and fairly regular in this field. The association between planning region and parents' beliefs regarding school collaboration in the field of shaping children's character was statistically significant, $X^2(4, N = 298) = 23.524, p = .000$. Positive collaboration was mentioned more often by parents from Latgale and Zemgale and less often – from Riga and Vidzeme (see Table 2).

Table 2. Parents' opinion regarding school-family collaboration in the field of shaping children's character (by planning regions)

			Planning regions					Total
			Riga	Latgale	Kurzeme	Vidzeme	Zemgale	
Does the school collaborate with you as parents in the field of shaping your children's character?	Rather yes	Count	66 _a	40 _b	25 _{a,b}	13 _a	47 _b	191
		%	51.6%	83.3%	67.6%	52.0%	78.3%	64.1%
	Rather no	Count	62 _a	8 _b	12 _{a,b}	12 _a	13 _b	107
		%	48.4%	16.7%	32.4%	48.0%	21.7%	35.9%
Total			128	48	37	25	60	298

Note. Z-test & Bonferroni method were employed via Crosstabs to compare column proportions and to adjust p-values. Each subscript letter denotes a subset of planning region categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Table 3. Models and strategies for promoting effective family-school partnerships for character education in Latvia: Parents' views

Thematic block	Code	Count of references		Example quotes
		Within parents' positive experience	Within parents' negative or missing experience	
The family-school relationship models	1. The protective model // the model preventing partnerships	0	7	The school doesn't want it, unfortunately. The teacher is stubbornly doing her own thing, not considering what parents think. Contact has vanished and arbitrariness has taken over.
	2. The school-to-home transmission model // the nominal partnership model	19	6	The teacher pays attention to each situation, discussing it separately with the child and, if necessary, involving the parents.
	3. The curriculum enrichment model // the traditional partnership model	29	0	Regular feedback from the school on the child's school life; topics on character development relevant to the child's age are raised in class parent meetings.
	4. The partnership model // the authentic partnership model	19	0	The school is oriented towards cooperation with parents. The school has identified values, has worked with parents to define them, and is now putting them into practice in a variety of ways.
	5. Parenting	1	N/A	However, I believe that it is also my commitment and responsibility as a parent whether my child takes learning seriously and responsibly.
	6. Communicating	72	N/A	Feedback from teachers is not limited to grades; we can also agree together on solutions to other challenges and receive both support and guidance.
	7. Volunteering	3	N/A	Parents are regularly involved and take part in the organisation of various events.
	8. Learning at home	5	N/A	Children must complete a growth journal together with their parents, including character growth.
	9. Decision-making	9	N/A	Support staff help. Our school has an excellent social pedagogue who helps, clarifies difficult situations and works with both children and parents.
	10. Collaborating with the community	0	N/A	Parents' days, meetings and educational events are held to discuss topical issues and problems.

Note. N/A – strategies aimed at promoting effective family-school partnerships were not analysed within parents' negative or missing experience.

Which are the most/least common family-school relationship models and strategies for promoting effective family-school partnerships to implement character education at school in Latvia?

The summary of the thematic analysis employed using deductive (i. e., pre-set scheme) approach to coding is presented in Table 3. The most common family-school relationship model to implement character education at school in Latvia was the curriculum enrichment model (Swap, 1993) and/or the traditional partnership model (Auerbach, 2010). According to those models, teachers and parents (as experts and supporters of school agenda) work together to enrich the curriculum, to raise student achievements improving family-school communication and providing a more family-friendly school climate.

The least common family-school relationship model to implement character education at school in Latvia was the protective model (Swap, 1993) and/or the model preventing partnerships (Auerbach, 2010), where parents are perceived as non-partners, outsiders and intruders. In the good experiences shared by the respondents, the most common strategy aimed at promoting effective family-school partnerships was ‘Communicating’ (e. g., from school to home and from home to school about school curriculum and children’s developmental progress).

Conclusions

Based on a study of theoretical models of family-school partnerships and on a typology of existing strategies making them effective, this research shed light on how family-school collaboration for character education happens in Latvia and how families understand what a fruitful relationship with the school for the moral development of their children would be. The main conclusions are as follows:

- Most parents believed that collaboration with the school for character education was moderately good and fairly regular, in particular in the South and East regions of Latvia.
- The most commonly used family-school relationship models are the curriculum enrichment model and/or the traditional partnership model. Those models are practical and short-term oriented: they stress regular teachers’ feedback on the child’s school life and the discussion in class parent meetings of character development topics relevant to the child’s age, rather than a joint identification/definition of the values to be promoted in the long-term.
- The protective model was the least common one. Most of parents do not perceive themselves as non-partners and outsiders at school.

- Parents believed that improving two-sided family-school communication (e. g., informing parents about school life and children's problems and achievements, identifying and resolving problems, giving an advice/counsel during teacher-parent individual conversations and consultations) was highly instrumental for promoting effective partnerships.

These conclusions could serve as strong bases for a constructive social dialogue about family-school collaboration for pupils' moral education in Latvian schools.

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