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SIMULATIONS AS A TOOL SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS: THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH EDUCATION AND CARE

INTRODUCTION

Given the many problems that arise in communication between teachers and parents in the education process, the aim of the article is to present the simulation tool as one of the solutions to problems in communication with parents of children at different levels of education on the example of Poland.

1. PARENT–TEACHER COOPERATION IN POLAND

The challenge of contemporary childhood education and care is not only to take care of children's education quality, but also to maintain good cooperation and communication with parents. Among the benefits of effective cooperation between parents and teachers, the literature lists the following: getting to know the needs, concerns, expectations and problems of students (Gątarek, 2024),

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preventing risky behavior and violence among young people (Ciszewska, 2017; Niejenhuis et al., 2020; Honkowicz-Bukowska et al., 2015), improving students' social and emotional well-being (Koivula et al., 2023). Most European education systems emphasize the importance of collaboration with parents and encourage early childhood education and care settings to provide specifying measures aimed at parents. Forms of support for parents include: information sessions and parent – staff meetings, parenting programmes, home learning guidance or home visits (European Commission, 2025). In Poland, the obligation to cooperate with parents is included in the Act of 14 December 2016 – The Education Law (Journal of Laws/Dz.U. of 2017, item 59). Detailed provisions regarding areas of cooperation include the obligation to inform about the progress of the child's development and learning, providing psychological and pedagogical support to both children and their parents.

2. PARENTS' POSITION IN COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS

The factor that determines effective communication in the relationship between parents and teachers is the appropriate position of the parent, in which he or she is to be treated as a partner on an equal footing with the teacher (Śliwerski, 2017). Over the last few decades, the position of the parent in school has changed. Research conducted in selected countries indicates that the positioning of parents in the relationship with the educational institution is heading towards an increasing partnership (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Parents, who are increasingly aware of their role, want to be treated by teachers with respect, which makes them more and more demanding towards teachers and institutions. Research on Polish teachers and guardians indicates that they struggle with very demanding and conflict-prone parents, and the parents' attitude towards the staff is characterized by a lack of trust, suspicion, and at the same time undermining the competences of teachers. In the studies by Zalewska-Bujak (2020), teachers indicated that parents often disagree with their position and make accusations against them, and parents lack trust and faith that the teacher is their ally and has the best intentions towards their children. In turn, studies of parents (Siemionow & Szewczyk 2024) indicate the need for direct contact with teachers and regular updates on their child's functioning and development. The growing position of parents in the relationship with the teacher reveals many conflict situations that are especially visible in specific groups of parents in specific families: e.g. conflicted families and parents in the process of divorce (Świdrak, 2025),

parents of children with disabilities or developmental disorders (Gątarek, 2024), parents from emigrant and refugee families (Hmelak et al., 2021; Kuszak & Sadowska, 2023). In view of the above, an important element of building positive relationships between teachers and parents seems to be the prior preparation of young teachers and students for conversations with parents.

3. PREPARING FUTURE TEACHERS TO COOPERATE WITH PARENTS

The preparation of students for their teaching profession requires us to respect the complexity of educational context in which the teachers perform their teaching activities. One of the important fields the prospective teachers learn about during their study is family. Its study contributes to broadening the students' professional knowledge from different aspects – community, professional and individual (Kurnicová, 2012).

In Poland, in the programmes of pedagogical studies preparing for the teaching job, the standard of the teaching profession obliges universities to include the ability to cooperate with various groups of people, including parents of pupils, as part of the pedagogical preparation. Teacher education programs include subjects aimed at preparing future teachers for cooperation and communication with parents.

Kaczor's (2024) research conducted among pedagogy students in Kraków identified skills that teacher trainees believe are useful in building teacher–parent dialogue. These are: creating an atmosphere of trust, empathy, encouraging cooperation, and the ability to reduce feelings of discomfort, anxiety and powerlessness in parents. It was shown that good teacher–parent communication helps in working with the pupil.

Despite this, research indicates that students and teachers do not always acquire the necessary skills and feel insecure in contacts with parents. Pedagogy students in Wrocław show that they are open to dialogue and communication with parents, but they are not always able to organize it, because they are not aware of how communication should be conducted (Musiał, 2024).

The presented results of the research show that it is necessary to direct more attention to the practical part concerning the training of teachers during studies for cooperation with parents, where teachers will be able to practically apply and experience the process of cooperation in a real or simulated environment.

4. SIMULATION-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Simulation-based learning (SBL) has become a central approach in teacher education, offering a bridge between theoretical understanding and applied teaching practice (Chernikova et al., 2020; Dotger & Chandler-Olcott, 2022). Simulations are grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which emphasizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In a simulation, educators face realistic challenges – such as a parent–teacher confrontation or a student's behavioural crisis – constituting the concrete experience. These are followed by structured debriefing, which supports reflection and conceptualization, often guided by a skilled facilitator (Levin et al., 2023). Through this process, teachers can practice responding to challenging interactions – such as aggressive parental criticism or staffroom conflict – without fear of real-world consequences (Dotger, 2010; Theelen et al., 2019b).

Simulation-based learning is particularly effective for developing teachers' social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies. SEL refers to the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2023). Simulations are uniquely suited for practicing SEL because they present emotionally charged and relationally complex situations that demand active emotional engagement and interpersonal sensitivity (Flavian & Levin, 2024; Freedman, Dotger & Song, 2020). In addition, simulations have been shown to support the development of reflective practice, which is vital for teachers' ongoing professional growth (Yan & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2023). This reflection also cultivates habits of inquiry, adaptability, and self-awareness – traits associated with teaching effectiveness (Hall & Tori, 2017; Linder & Weissblueth, 2023).

Moreover, simulations respond to the growing demand in higher education for authentic learning environments that connect theory to practice (Radović et al., 2021). Simulations allow programs to ensure that all teacher candidates engage with difficult conversations – whether related to inclusion, trauma, conflict, or discipline – in a deliberate, guided way (Dotger & Ashby, 2010; Angelini, 2016). This exposure enhances teachers' readiness to work in diverse and often challenging educational contexts.

5. SIMULATION MODALITIES FOR PARENT–TEACHER COMMUNICATION

Simulation-based learning in teacher education provides structured opportunities to engage with realistic educational dilemmas while building relational and communication skills, such as effective parent–teacher interactions – a core teaching competency for which many preservice teachers feel unprepared (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Levin, 2023). The literature identifies five primary types of simulations, each varying in the depth of engagement and realism they offer (Kasperski et al., 2025). At the highest end of this continuum are clinical simulations, followed by role-play, immersive simulations, virtual simulations, and, at the lowest end, video-based case analysis.

Clinical simulations feature live, unscripted interactions between teacher candidates and trained actors portraying parents or colleagues, allowing participants to navigate emotionally complex, relational challenges while being observed and later debriefed. Initially developed for teacher education by Dotger (2010), these simulations can also be conducted online (Kasperski & Hemi, 2022). They provide high authenticity and emotional depth but require significant resources, including skilled actors and facilitators, and must be carefully managed to ensure emotional safety (Levin et al., 2023). Widely used to build teachers' communication skills, clinical simulations have been shown to improve clarity, empathy, and confidence in both in-person and online formats (De Coninck et al., 2020). They support preparation for difficult parent conversations by emphasizing emotional authenticity and ethical complexity (Dotger & Alger, 2012), activating emotional, behavioural, and conceptual competencies (Levin, 2023), and bridging theory and practice through reflective dialogue (Muchnik-Rozanov & Levin, 2024). Research has also found sustained gains in emotional regulation (Gerich & Schmitz, 2016) and enhanced capacity for authentic dialogue (Khasnabis et al., 2018), affirming the value of clinical simulations despite their resource-intensive nature.

Role-play simulations require participants to enact all roles within a scenario, making them a flexible, accessible tool for practicing relational skills. They foster perspective-taking and ethical reasoning in professional dilemmas (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2013), and have been used to simulate racially charged parent–teacher interactions to promote critical reflection on bias and institutional dynamics (Goldin et al., 2019). They also help build empathy and contextual awareness when exploring family-related scenarios (Scorgie, 2010). However, their effectiveness depends on participant engagement and improvisation, and consistency can vary across groups (Powers et al., 2019).

Immersive simulations using avatars, such as the Mursion environment (Dalinger et al., 2020), allow participants to interact with virtual students or parents controlled by a human facilitator. These simulations enhance classroom management skills, confidence, and situational awareness while offering opportunities for controlled repetition and scalable implementation (Dieker et al., 2023). Several studies have used avatar-based simulations specifically for parent–teacher interactions, showing improvements in candidates' decision-making, confidence, and communication (Accardo & Xin, 2017) and increased self-efficacy in handling sensitive discussions (Forstall-Lemoine, 2024). Mixed-reality designs combining avatars with augmented reality have further supported emotional regulation and intercultural communication during parent–teacher conferences (Scarparolo & Mayne, 2022). However, while valuable for rehearsal, these simulations require significant technological resources and offer limited emotional nuance and spontaneity.

Virtual simulations like SimSchool (Krämer & Zimmermann, 2022) use branching scenarios where participants choose responses to teaching challenges and receive automated feedback. Rayner and Fluck (2014) found that pre-service teachers valued the chance to explore different outcomes in a low-pressure environment. Similarly, these simulations can deepen teachers' knowledge of family partnerships and enhance their communication and active listening skills with parents (Paz-Albo et al., 2023). While these simulations support cognitive reasoning and preparation for parent–teacher dialogue, they still lack the emotional feedback and real-time complexity of live interactions.

Video-based case simulations use recorded vignettes of educational interactions, inviting participants to analyse, interpret, or respond. This format fosters reflective thinking, situational awareness, and ethical reasoning (De Jong et al., 2012; Theelen et al., 2019a). It is low-cost, easy to distribute, and safe for early learners, but the absence of live interaction limits experiential learning depth. Chen (2020) used **video clips** of culturally insensitive parent–teacher exchanges to prompt participant responses, helping them develop emotional attunement and recognize and address marginalizing discourses.

These modalities offer valuable tools for developing parent–teacher communication skills, but their impact depends on thoughtful, systematic use in teacher education. The following section outlines how Polish programs can pragmatically integrate these simulations to address identified relational challenges.

6. STRENGTHENING TEACHER–PARENT COMMUNICATION THROUGH SIMULATIONS

Improving teacher–parent communication in Poland requires addressing power tensions, conflicts with specific parent groups (e.g., parents in family crises or divorce, parents of children with disabilities, and migrant or refugee parents), high parental expectations, and the need for trust-building. Given the absence of systematic simulation-based learning and limited resources in teacher education, a pragmatic, scalable approach is needed.

Applying Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation – can maximize the learning potential of simulations. While the "experience" itself will vary across modalities (e.g., clinical simulations to video cases), structured debriefing should accompany all simulation types to support emotional regulation, reflective learning, and practical strategy development. This systematic approach strengthens the bridge between theory and practice, preparing future teachers for confident, compassionate, and effective partnerships with parents.

To begin, teacher education programs can incorporate structured role-play and video-based case analysis into existing courses. These low-cost methods allow student teachers to practice challenging conversations, address bias, and build empathy. Instructors can start with peer enactments or recorded vignettes followed by guided reflection. Goldin et al. (2019) provide a useful model for designing role-play simulations, demonstrating how scenarios addressing racially charged parent–teacher interactions can foster critical reflection on bias and relational strategies. Building on these initial steps, simulations should then move from isolated activities to systematic integration within courses focusing on parent–teacher communication, inclusion, and practicum preparation, ensuring these skills are consistently practiced throughout teacher training. Their primary focus here should be on trust-building, active listening, and culturally responsive dialogue with parents.

As programs advance, BOT-based virtual simulations (e.g., AI chatbots simulating parent conversations) can offer a low-cost, accessible tool for practicing responses to challenging parent interactions, refining active listening, and receiving immediate feedback. These can supplement role-play and video analysis to expand opportunities for systematic, scalable parent–teacher communication training. Where resources allow, higher-fidelity simulations such as clinical or immersive simulations can be gradually introduced to practice emotionally complex conversations with parents. Partnerships with local actors or neighbouring institutions can support initial implementation.

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SIMULATIONS AS A TOOL SUPPORTING
COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS:
THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH EDUCATION AND CARE

SUMMARY

The article concerns the simulation method as a proposal for solving problems in parent-teacher communication on the example of Polish education and care. Based on a review of research, the benefits of using the simulation tool in the education of students and teachers at the stage of preparation for the teaching profession are shown.

Keywords: simulations; parent-teacher cooperation; teacher education

SYMULACJE JAKO NARZĘDZIE WSPIERAJĄCE
KOMUNIKACJĘ Z RODZICAMI
NA PRZYKŁADZIE POLSKIEJ EDUKACJI I OPIEKI

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł dotyczy metody symulacji jako propozycji rozwiązania problemów w komunikacji ro-
dzic-nauczyciel na przykładzie polskiej edukacji i opieki. Na podstawie przeglądu badań przedsta-
wiono korzyści wynikające ze stosowania narzędzia symulacji w edukacji studentów i nauczycieli na
etapie przygotowania do wykonywania zawodu nauczyciela.

Słowa kluczowe: symulacje; współpraca rodzic-nauczyciel; kształcenie nauczycieli