

Article

Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Family Engagement: Insights from the Initial Teacher Education Syllabus

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Abstract: Family involvement and participation in education (FIPE) profoundly impacts the quality of students' academic and social development. Initial teacher education contribution in fostering attitudes, skills, and strategies for effective FIPE is therefore unquestionable. We aimed to find out to what extent Portuguese pre-service teachers are prepared to engage families. A document analysis was conducted to establish explicit information regarding FIPE within initial teacher education syllabi. Out of 621 syllabi across 36 master's courses from 25 institutions, only 98 included some information on FIPE. A mere 12 syllabi, from seven institutions, exclusively addressed family–school relationships. Our study covered over 87% of the master's courses and syllabi, exposing inconsistencies in their educational aims, content, and recommended literature. These findings highlight discrepancies within the initial teacher education syllabi and underscore the need for the enhanced training of pre-service teachers in FIPE. It is crucial to promote more in-depth and explicit syllabi to promote effective family engagement and enrich initial teacher education programs.

Keywords: family involvement and participation in education; initial teacher education; pre-service teachers; syllabi



Citation: Cabral, S.; Mata, L.; Peixoto, F. Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Family Engagement: Insights from the Initial Teacher Education Syllabus. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 674. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14060674>

Academic Editors: Ainat Guberman and Vasileios Symeonidis

Received: 24 May 2024

Revised: 17 June 2024

Accepted: 18 June 2024

Published: 20 June 2024



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1. Introduction

Family involvement and participation in education (FIPE), or the participation of significant caregivers in ways that promote academic and social wellbeing in their children's educational process, is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [1–3]. The seminal work by Coleman et al. [3] triggered a growing discussion in the social sciences by drawing attention to the importance of families in children's education. From this, the field of educational research over the last 58 years has focused on gathering evidence about the influence of different factors on students' motivation to learn, including family factors. What has historically been seen as a family responsibility is now being looked at in a different way: how can schools and educators engage with all students' families at an early stage to maximise their academic success [4]?

Recently, the crucial role of both the school and the family in students' learning has been seen as consensual. The question about what is more important for students' learning (i.e., the school or the family) no longer arises. The results are “consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life” [5] (p. 7). Home and school systems can, and should, work together and be successful in sustaining connections to improve students' learning and achievement.

The worldwide focus on FIPE has increased, and it has been seen as fundamental to the educational success and wellbeing of students, families, and teachers [6–9]. Researchers are highlighting the contribution of initial teacher education (ITE) to the development of skills, strategies, attitudes, perceptions, and dispositions that encourage FIPE. FIPE's positive impacts are supported by evidence, which demand careful attention to how pre-service teachers are achieving the best knowledge to build and sustain trusting relationships with families and to promote their involvement (e.g., [3,10–13]).

Global research has shown that these competencies that encourage FIPE are frequently inconsistent in initial teacher education [14–18]. There is evidence that initial teacher education programmes pay little attention to preparing pre-service teachers to form these relationships [11,19–22]. Particularly in Europe, research addressing how pre-service teachers are prepared to work with families is scarce [21,23,24], and there is even less focus on early childhood educators' master's degrees [19]. Using document analysis, this paper addresses how future early childhood educators are prepared to engage families in their practice by analysing the content of their master's degree syllabi.

1.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

FIPE is described as professionals and families collaborating to enhance children's potential in social, emotional, behavioural, and academic domains [1,25]. It is a multidimensional construct suffering from a variety of perceptions, definitions, and designations to describe the same school–family dynamics: this proliferation of terms and definitions in scientific, political, and common-sense discourses may represent one of the biggest obstacles to investigating FIPE [8,26,27].

To guide our research, we drew on Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory. The external model of this theory identified three main contexts that influence children's learning and development: family, school, and the community. It acknowledges a distinction between the practices they carry out independently and together, and that children benefit from the collaboration of adults who encourage their development and learning [28,29]. "The internal model shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community" [29] (p. 8). Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence has been a consistent reference, enhanced and applied in a range of cultural contexts, with several years of existence and acceptance. It is a research-based framework that clearly identifies types and specific involvement practices, as well as the challenges and the benefits for children, families, and teachers of well-designed and well-implemented practices. Our need to define FIPE is due to the main goal of characterising initial teacher education courses to promote it. We believe that Epstein's [29] framework structure and dynamic will allow for a more rigorous and quality approach to this issue. Therefore, from now on, we will refer to FIPE, keeping in mind all possible relationships that can be generated between families and schools that support children's development and learning [1,2,8,10,30,31].

1.2. Benefits and Challenges of FIPE

FIPE's well-known impact has been highlighted since the 1960s, alongside its benefits, which have been widely referenced and disseminated in the literature. Positive effects refer to the quality of students' development and learning, improved behaviour, and decreased school absenteeism; some authors associate the quality of involvement with students' educational and behavioural success [3,8,32]. Some recent findings highlight that FIPE benefits are not only for children, but also for families, who feel socially valued, and for teachers, who report greater professional satisfaction [8,11,33,34].

It is important that teachers set out on their profession knowing that establishing strong partnerships with families is a fundamental part of their role [26]. Fostering this kind of environment improves the success and significance of students' learning. The role of families in supporting their children's educational progression throughout school also increases [19]. The evidence that FIPE is a central element for the educational success and wellbeing of students, families, and teachers is unquestionable. With the goal of encouraging trusting and effective relationships between early childhood educators and families, it is crucial to develop such knowledge, skills, and attitudes in initial teacher education intentionally [10–12,26,35].

Some studies on pre-service teachers' training have revealed a gap between the importance of FIPE and the attention that initial teacher education is giving to it [36–39]. Despite increased attention to this topic in initial teacher education, most newly trained teachers feel

unprepared to work with their students' families since FIPE is not adequately addressed in initial teacher education in ways that prepare them to promote it [40–42]. Sarmiento [43,44] and Silva [45] have already warned that Portuguese initial teacher education may not be approaching FIPE consistently, with few optional syllabi intentionally addressing this topic. As far as we are aware, no recent research on FIPE has been carried out in Portugal following the 1999 Bologna Declaration and the subsequent reform of higher education, particularly in initial teacher education master's degrees, characterising the educational aims, learning outcomes, contents, recommended bibliography, and organisational aspects.

1.3. FIPE and Initial Teacher Education: The Portuguese Case

In the 1980s, there was a significant advance in the participation of families in schools in Portugal, Law 46/86 referring to the participation of all those involved in the educational process [46] (p. 3068). Until then, FIPE was barely present in Portuguese legislation: families' responsibility was to send their children to school daily and to meet the teachers when invited [47]. Over the years, legislation has recognised families' right to participate in their children's school life and given them more and more responsibilities [44,47]. For instance, Decree Law n° 240/2001, concerning teachers' professional profile, was a fundamental guiding framework stating that the teacher "collaborates with all actors in the educational process, fostering the creation and development of mutual respect relationships between teachers, students, parents and non-teaching staff" [48] (p. 5571).

In Portugal today, to work as an early childhood educator, after a three-year degree in basic education, individuals must complete one of two master's degrees: early childhood education or early childhood and primary school education. Decree Law n° 79/2014 approves the professional qualification for teaching and defines the European Credit Transfer Accumulation System (each corresponding to up to 30 working hours): 90 for educators and 120 for educators/primary school teachers. These credits are distributed through their training components: teaching; general education; specific didactics; cultural, social, and ethical; and initiation to professional practice or internship [49]. Both master's degrees include between 39 and 48 credits for internship and a minimum of six credits for general education, which covers the common knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for all teachers to perform their role [49], the ideal setting for pre-service teachers to learn and experience FIPE [26].

The Portuguese government already considers FIPE in specific legislation [46,48]; however, this does not guarantee that it is translated into educational aims and learning outcomes, content, or recommended bibliographies in initial teacher education curricula. For instance, although the legislation exists, there might not be enough monitoring to ensure FIPE is indeed addressed in these degrees. Moreover, constraints to which pre-service teachers are open, in addition to the absence of explicit training, include the limited opportunities to interact with families during their internship [50]. As Epstein and Sheldon [4] (p. 203) state, "The policy tells educators to engage families but does not specify how to meet these requirements". The lack of in-depth reflection on this topic means that family engagement practices are mostly the result of the pedagogical vision and individual interpretation [26,51]. Based on research that has been conducted so far, even though it does not inform us how pre-service teachers are taught this topic in their classes, we may conclude that although FIPE is a concern for initial teacher education, and despite the government's acknowledgement of this problem, initial teacher education institutions and governments are usually unable to solve it.

1.4. Current Study

The main goal of this research is to determine whether and how Portuguese initial teacher education for early childhood educators handles FIPE. Recent research shows that initial teacher education rarely addresses the interpersonal aspects of the teaching profession, where FIPE is included, despite evidence of their positive impact [18,42,52]. Walker [18] even states that initial teacher education may be limiting the quantity, scope,

and quality of teaching and consequent learning about FIPE. So, future early childhood educators finish their courses without feeling confident about promoting and effectively supporting this core competence, with no formal education in this area [11,27]. Therefore, despite recognising its importance, many early childhood educators find implementing and maintaining this involvement challenging [53].

The OECD [54–56] confirms how crucial working with families is to support children's performance in school and beyond, reinforcing the importance of highlighting families' engagement in curriculum frameworks, which is underscored in many countries. The literature review has exposed that family involvement benefits are studied, their significance acknowledged, the implementation challenges noted, the curriculum held accountable, and the gap continues.

Across Europe, research has found that FIPE is hard to cover in initial teacher education curricula. A study involving seven European countries (Belgium, England, Finland, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland) examined initial teacher education frameworks, searching for their capacity to either facilitate or hinder this crucial learning [39]. Alongside the importance that governments and institutions attribute to FIPE, the results clearly show that none of these cross-nation studies offer a satisfying perspective addressing this issue [13,24,38,39,50,57–59]. Besides the advances in policy, enhancing initial teacher education courses and fostering the creation of a shared vision on FIPE seems to be quite pertinent. Consequently, we sought to determine to what extent the curricula and their syllabi included explicit and consistent information about FIPE, uncovering the Portuguese reality.

1.5. Research Questions

FIPE positively affects the social, behavioural, and academic aspects of students, and these skills must be intentionally developed in initial teacher education. To determine whether our national initial teacher education frameworks enable or constrain future early childhood educators' effective training for family engagement, we sought to characterise their training through a document analysis. In this study, our central questions were as follows: How are early childhood educators being prepared for FIPE in Portugal? What can be found in the curriculum regarding FIPE?

- a. Which syllabi include explicit information about FIPE?
- b. What are their main subjects, mandatory nature, and European Credit Transfer Accumulation System?
- c. What are their educational aims, learning outcomes, content, and recommended bibliographies?
- d. Is there consistency between all these elements?

2. Materials and Methods

For data analysis, we conducted a syllabi content analysis, which can be defined as a systematic process of searching and organising information to enhance understanding and communicate findings to others [60]. Our analysis followed a dialectical process combining deductive and inductive approaches. We began with a provisional "start list" of codes derived from our theoretical framework [29], and our research questions "How are early childhood educators being prepared for Family Involvement in Preschool Education (FIPE) in Portugal?" and "What can be found in the curriculum regarding FIPE?" This deductive approach was supplemented by inductive coding as new themes emerged from reading the syllabi [61,62]. This qualitative approach also involved some quantification of data, enabling us to examine and interpret textual content beyond mere statistical significance. During the process, the codes were continuously revised, modified, deleted, and expanded to incorporate new codes [62,63]. This method allowed us to manage a large volume of textual data efficiently and leveraged the strengths of both deductive and inductive approaches, providing a comprehensive understanding of the content, contributing to the existing literature, and corroborating previous research.

We examined the syllabi to identify covered topics using keyword searches (e.g., partnership, family, involvement, participation, and communication). During the initial coding, additional codes emerged (e.g., syllabi typology, stakeholders' roles, family intervention, strategies, and programs). After the coding, we organised categories and sub-categories based on the relationships between the codes (e.g., type of subject/educational area; character—optional/mandatory; ECTS; goals; contents; and main recommended bibliography). These codes were then refined to generate themes, which we used to answer our research questions. The validity of the identified categories and themes was continuously tested by the research team members to ensure they accurately reflected the data [64].

2.1. Data and Procedures

First, we identified all the institutions responsible for delivering the early childhood educators master's degrees: early childhood education and early childhood and primary school education registered in the General Directorate of Higher Education in January 2021. This approach revealed 29 institutions, 41 courses (15 for educators and 26 for educators and primary school teachers), and 706 syllabi listed in *Diário da República* (Portugal's official gazette which publishes a wide range of acts: constitutional laws, international conventions, and their ratification notices, among other legal acts, including the study plans of academic degrees). Then, we searched all the institutional websites to collect the syllabi content. When it was not available online, we contacted the course coordinators and solicited access to the syllabus. Our final data consisted of 86.2% of the institutions ($n = 25$), 36 courses, and 621 syllabi. Information from four institutions was not available, which accounts for the difference between the early 706 and the 621 we ended up with, but most of the Portuguese territory (Azores, Madeira, north, Centre, Lisbon metropolitan area, and south) was represented.

2.2. Data Analysis

Epstein's theory's [29] main concepts and ideas were the base to identify the first keywords for our data analysis process (e.g., partnership, family, involvement, participation, and communication). The syllabi were examined to determine what topics were covered using these keyword searches. According to our goals, only the syllabi including specific content related to FIPE were considered. Therefore, we searched for keywords in the syllabi's educational aims and learning outcomes, content, and recommended bibliographies. After this identification, we complemented with other keywords that emerged from the literature, and from the data (e.g., syllabi typology, stakeholders' roles, family intervention, strategies, and programmes).

Through this search, it was possible to identify and establish our corpus with 98 syllabi, some provided by master's degree coordinators and the majority accessed online. Once all the syllabi were identified, the analysis was carried out in five steps:

1. Identify all the syllabi that include content related to FIPE.
2. Determine the educational aims and learning outcomes related to FIPE specified in the selected syllabi.
3. Categorise the content related to FIPE indicated in the selected syllabi.
4. Recognise the main recommended bibliography related to FIPE in the syllabi.
5. Analyse the coherence and consistency between these core elements (aims, content, and bibliography).

The unit of analysis varied from parts of sentences to whole paragraphs; the criterion for inclusion was that each coded excerpt constituted an independent element of meaning about the phenomenon being studied [61]. The analysis was performed using the MAXQDA plus software version 2022 [65]. The analytical process was thus structured and reliable. A second rater coded 30 syllabi independently to assess intercoder reliability according to a shared codebook previously developed. Cohen's kappa values were calculated to ensure inter-rater agreement, and the kappa value was good ($k\text{-Cohen} = 0.75$), showing an acceptable level of agreement [66].

3. Results

Most of the Portuguese territory (Azores, Madeira, north, Centre, Lisbon metropolitan area, south) was represented by 86.2% ($n = 25$) of the national institutions. Our analysis retained only the courses whose syllabi were available for consultation, comprising 87.8% of the current early childhood education and early childhood and primary school education master's degrees ($n = 36$, 14 educators and 22 educators/primary school teachers), and 88% of the syllabi ($n = 621$).

Of the 25 institutions, approximately 72% were public ($n = 18$), and 72% developed in polytechnic higher education ($n = 18$) and 28% in universities ($n = 7$). Of the 36 courses, 33.3% were developed in Lisbon ($n = 12$) and 44.4% in the north and Central regions ($n = 16$, eight in each). The remaining 22.2% ($n = 8$) were from the other regions of Portugal, mainly the south, but used courses from an institution in the Azores and another in Madeira.

Our final corpus comprised 15.8% of the syllabi analysed ($n = 98$), generated through keyword searching, as stated in the data analysis procedures, with 46 syllabi from the 14 educators and 52 from the 22 educators/primary school teachers' master's degrees.

Following this preliminary glance at the data, we proceeded to identify five different characteristics of the syllabi: the main topics addressed and mandatory/optional nature; educational aims and learning outcomes; content; main bibliography; and the simultaneous presence of educational aims, content, and bibliography.

By analysing each syllabus's main focus, it was possible to identify five different topics: 1. internship; 2. educational needs, psychology, and inclusion; 3. family-school relationship; 4. methodologies; and 5. didactics. As we can see in Table 1, almost one-third of the syllabi content (30.6%, $n = 30$) was related to internship and 23.5% ($n = 23$) to educational needs, psychology, and inclusion. We found 12.2% ($n = 12$) clearly addressing the family-school relationship, representing less than 2% of the 621 syllabi in the 36 courses analysed. When looking at these 12 syllabi, it was possible to see that they represent six educators' master's courses and six educators/primary school teachers' master's courses, and only seven institutions. In Portugal today, only 24.1% of the institutions delivering these master's courses have at least one optional course on FIPE.

Table 1. Main topics addressed in syllabi and mandatory nature.

Main Topics	<i>f</i>	%	Optional		Mandatory	
			<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Internship	30	30.61	0	0.00	30	30.61
EN ¹ , psychology, and inclusion	23	23.47	9	9.18	14	14.29
Family-school relationship	12	12.24	10	10.20	2	2.04
Methodologies	19	19.39	3	3.06	16	16.33
Didactics	14	14.29	1	1.02	13	13.27
Total	98	100	23	23.46	75	76.54

¹ educational needs (EN).

Analysing the mandatory or optional nature of the syllabi, it was possible to understand that the main mandatory syllabi were related to internship, representing 30.6% of the corpus ($n = 30$). Most of the optional syllabi were represented by the family-school relationship main topic group (10.2%, $n = 10$) and educational needs, psychology, and inclusion (9.2%, $n = 9$).

Table 2 shows how many working hours were allocated to each major syllabus group through their correspondent European Credit Transfer Accumulation System. The syllabi referring to the family-school relationship have three credits or fewer. Among those with more than six ECTS, the internship syllabi are most represented; however, these tap into many more topics, competencies, and strategies than those related to family involvement. Not only do the syllabi related to the family-school relationship have the fewest predictable

working hours, but they also have the fewest of a mandatory nature—2% out of the 98 syllabi examined.

Table 2. Main syllabus topics and ECTS ¹.

Main Topics	Less than or Equal to 3 ECTS		Greater than 3 and Less than or Equal to 6 ECTS		Greater than 6 and Less than or Equal to 9 ECTS		Greater Than 9 ECTS	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Internship (<i>n</i> = 30)	1	1.02	1	1.02	3	3.06	25	25.51
EN, psychology, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 23)	11	11.22	12	12.25	0	0	0	0
Family–school relationship (<i>n</i> = 12)	12	12.25	0	0	0	0	0	0
Methodologies (<i>n</i> = 19)	5	5.10	14	14.29	0	0	0	0
Didactics (<i>n</i> = 14)	3	3.06	5	5.10	6	6.12	0	0
Total	32	32.65	32	32.66	9	9.18	25	25.51

¹ European Credit Transfer Accumulation System (ECTS).

After identifying the institutions and master’s degrees whose syllabi explicitly addressed the family–school relationship and general information, we proceeded to identify their educational aims and learning outcomes.

Educational aims and learning outcomes were organised into six main groups: 1. involvement in the field of educational needs; 2. conceptualising family involvement; 3. school and family relationships; 4. family involvement models; 5. family involvement challenges and benefits; and 6. family involvement strategies and/or programmes. Table 3 presents the main educational aims and learning outcomes, together with the main topics of the syllabi in which they occur.

Table 3. Most mentioned educational aims and learning outcomes addressing FIPE ¹.

Main Topics	Family Involvement in EN	Conceptualising Family Involvement	Family–School Relationships	Family Involvement Models	Family Involvement Challenges and Benefits	Family Involvement Intervention	No Educational Aims and Learning Outcomes on FIPE
Internship (<i>n</i> = 30)	0	0	12	3	0	13	4
EN, psychology, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 23)	7	3	4	0	0	4	4
Family–school relationship (<i>n</i> = 12)	0	10	3	9	7	10	0
Methodologies (<i>n</i> = 19)	0	0	5	3	1	3	8
Didactics (<i>n</i> = 14)	0	0	1	1	1	4	8
Total (<i>n</i> = 98)	7 (7.14%)	13 (13.27%)	25 (25.51%)	16 (16.33%)	9 (9.18%)	34 (34.69%)	24 (24.49)

¹ family involvement and participation in education (FIPE).

The most mentioned educational aims and learning outcomes are related to family involvement intervention and the development of programmes and strategies for family involvement (e.g., “Know different strategies to promote family involvement and training” or “Plan and develop daily strategies for a relationship with the family or other people in the child’s life”), emerging in 34 syllabi (34.69%), of which 13 belong to internship. This is followed by 25 syllabi (25.51%) referring to family–school relationships and understanding the roles (e.g., “Recognise the role of the educator/teacher in promoting the participation of parents”; “Realise the importance and power of their action in the development of parenthood”); here, too, internship is the major group (*n* = 12).

The study and conceptualisation of family involvement and participation in education, where the construct interpretation is expected, is surprisingly limited to 13 syllabi (13.27%), of which ten are family–school relationship syllabi (e.g., “To know and reflect the family and the community in a descriptive, historical, political and cultural perspective”). Exploring family involvement models (e.g., “Reflect on the school–family relationship in a holistic and systemic perspective” or “Master the theoretical and intervention models of parental involvement”) and recognising family involvement challenges and benefits (e.g., “Identify obstacles to effective parental participation” and “Recognise its advantages and limits”) are also educational aims and learning outcomes mostly emerging in specific family–school relationship syllabi.

The results of the family involvement and participation in education (FIPE) content addressed in the syllabi are presented in Table 4. These were firstly organised into six major groups: 1. contents in the field of EN; 2. conceptualisation; 3. family intervention—generic, programmes, and strategies; 4. family involvement models; 5. roles; and 6. challenges and benefits.

The most mentioned content (46.94%, $n = 46$) was generic references to intervention in the family (e.g., “Interaction with families and other actors for a pedagogy of participation in the educational process”; “Family/school/community interactions”; “Parental involvement in their children’s schooling”); these generic references appear in all the syllabus types. The remaining content is represented in a smaller number of the syllabi, ranging from 12.24% ($n = 11$) for content about educational needs to 2.04% ($n = 2$) for content related to families’ participation in decision-making processes.

From Table 4, it can also be noted that almost all the categories have few cases and almost all are from references in the syllabi specifically focused on family involvement as they have information in almost all content groups identified. We can also see that although internship is the most represented syllabi among the syllabi analysed ($n = 30$), the syllabi mainly focus on generic content about family interventions.

Regarding the main recommended bibliography, by searching for keywords in their titles, we found that 29.59% ($n = 29$) of the 98 syllabi have only one explicit reference to FIPE and 17.35% ($n = 17$) have two or more explicit references, leaving more than 53% ($n = 52$) of the syllabi with no specific references to FIPE in the bibliography. As we can see in Table 5, it is in didactics (78.57%) and in internship (70%) syllabi that the absence of a recommended bibliography is most observed. Data also highlight that in the family–school relationship syllabi, almost all (91.67%) have two or more explicit references to FIPE.

Table 4. Most mentioned content addressing FIPE.

Main Topics	1 Educational needs	2 Conceptualisation	Generic	Programmes	3 Family Intervention Strategies			4 Family Involvement Models				5 Roles		6 Challenges and Benefits	
					Generic	Decision Making	Family Support	Communication	Hoover–Dempsey and Sandler	Eccles and Harold	Epstein	Other	Teacher		Family
Internship (<i>n</i> = 30)	0	1	16	2	1	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
EN, psychology, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 23)	12	0	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	0
Family–school relationship (<i>n</i> = 12)	0	7	7	5	8	0	2	7	5	5	5	4	4	4	9
Methodologies (<i>n</i> = 19)	0	1	9	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	1
Didactics (<i>n</i> = 14)	0	2	9	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total (<i>n</i> = 98)	12 (12.24%)	11 (11.22%)	46 (46.94%)	7 (7.14%)	9 (9.18%)	2 (2.04%)	8 (8.16%)	9 (9.18%)	5 (5.10%)	5 (5.10%)	5 (5.10%)	6 (6.12%)	9 (9.18%)	11 (11.22%)	10 (10.20%)

Table 5. Recommended bibliography addressing FIPE.

Main Topics	No References		1 Explicit Reference		2 or More Explicit References	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Internship (<i>n</i> = 30)	21	70	6	20	3	10
EN, psychology, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 23)	8	34.78	13	56.52	2	8.70
Family–school relationship (<i>n</i> = 12)	1	8.33	0	0	11	91.67
Methodologies (<i>n</i> = 19)	11	57.89	8	42.11	0	0
Didactics (<i>n</i> = 14)	11	78.57	2	14.29	1	7.14
Total (<i>n</i> = 98)	52	53.06	29	29.59	17	17.35

Table 6 was organised in an attempt to determine the coherence and consistency of the data. It reveals that, of the 98 syllabi, only 33.67% (*n* = 33) have information in all these fields, eleven of them being family–school relationship syllabi.

Table 6. Coherence and consistency analyses.

Main Topics	Coherence between Educational Aims and Learning Outcomes, Content, and Recommended Bibliography	
	<i>f</i>	%
Internship (<i>n</i> = 30)	6	20
EN, psychology, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 23)	12	52.17
Family–school relationship (<i>n</i> = 12)	11	91.67
Methodologies (<i>n</i> = 19)	3	15.79
Didactics (<i>n</i> = 14)	1	7.14
Total (<i>n</i> = 98)	33	33.67

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Global initiatives in teacher training aim to prepare pre-service teachers to engage with families and communities. Proper training in this area has a positive impact on family involvement and participation [67]. Its benefits and importance have been proved repeatedly and consistently over the years [68–71]. Family involvement and participation in education (FIPE) is widely accepted as a policy and educational ideal; however, efforts in terms of curricular coverage within initial teachers’ education courses have not kept pace with the demands of the educational agenda [72]. Research has shown that pre-service teachers’ preparation for FIPE is insufficient or may be entirely missing [21,24,38,39,68]. The disparity between the relevance of FIPE and the attention that initial teacher education assigns to this issue has increasingly been highlighted. Our main goal was to characterise FIPE in initial teacher education courses for early childhood educators in the Portuguese context. This was accomplished through an in-depth analysis of their required master’s courses.

Our initial attempts to map Portuguese initial teacher education addressing FIPE revealed a complex and evolving landscape. We found syllabi from diverse topics that somehow included information about FIPE, FIPE within internship, and in standalone syllabi. Our research also revealed that while some initial teacher education master’s courses in Portugal prepare pre-service teachers for FIPE in a variety of ways, much more must

be done to ensure consistency and coherence in this preparation. Over 88% of the existing master's degrees for early childhood educators were analysed. Out of the 621 syllabi, only 98 (17.2%) contained keywords that led us to believe that we would find explicit information on FIPE in their detailed analysis. In fact, they all included some information on the topic, even if it was more generic. In the end, our results revealed that just 33 syllabi provided complete, coherent, and consistent information in all the fields analysed (educational aims and learning outcomes, content, and recommended bibliography). So, while FIPE is possible and is included in some syllabi, gaps, inconsistencies, and an already crowded curriculum imply that not all pre-service teachers have the opportunity to address this topic.

Our findings make clear that the Portuguese syllabi are hardly aligned with Epstein's internal or external model [29]. The educational aims or content addressing FIPE in the syllabi were far from referring to theoretical models or challenges and benefits from these complex interpersonal relations. Although some family intervention strategies are existent in the syllabi analysed, they are mainly generic and not specifically child-centred.

These results corroborate and complement data in other studies in different countries [18,38,53,73], and are possibly behind what Epstein [41] also uncovers, that most newly trained teachers do not feel prepared to work with students' families. The data also highlight the major absence of explicit and intentional information on FIPE in the training of early childhood educators, similar to what was identified in other countries (e.g., [36–38,50,57,59,73]). However, an analysis of all the courses and syllabi allowed us to see that while some syllabi prioritise this topic, others give minimal attention to it, without a coherent and consistent theoretical framework and without explicit guidelines.

Concerning the conceptualisation, as widely mentioned in the literature (e.g., [4]), there is, again, no consistency. The educational aims and learning outcomes, when explicit in the syllabus, do not always give rise to specific content in the curriculum and are not necessarily supported by an explicit theoretical framework in the recommended bibliography, which is an important way to give consistency and intentionality when training pre-service teachers. Recent investigations showed inconsistencies, without “an intentional and structured approach (in this area)” in initial teacher education, perpetuating a disconnection between training for FIPE, which we hope pre-service teachers will receive, and what is really addressed and learned [17] (p. 263), [18].

Research has provided evidence that education systems are progressively more concerned with initial teacher education in terms of developing knowledge and skills among pre-service teachers to involve families [12,41]. Efforts have been comprehensive and include more activities aimed at better preparing pre-service teachers for FIPE [12,38,57,73]. In line with the international scene (e.g., [12,24,26,36,41,73]), we found advances, with some specific syllabi in the curricula addressing the topic. Portugal recognises FIPE's significance through its legislation and some advances in a few institutions responsible for delivering this training, but implementation methods or an involvement and participation framework are yet not clearly defined.

Today, we know that the professional's role in this field requires a specific approach during training and that this must be intentional and of high quality [13,24,67]. Concerns about the academic skills of pre-service teachers are recurrently featured in education quality policy discussions around the world [55]. Portugal is not an exception, and with this study, we aimed to take a bigger picture of the initial teacher education curricula in terms of the presence of up-to-date FIPE content and the possible impact of policy and practice. This curricula analysis allows us to confirm that in Portugal (with few exceptions and like other European studies), the learning of competencies, attitudes, and skills that pre-service teachers must develop to promote FIPE is not totally explicit in their master's syllabi. While FIPE is possible and takes place in some (few) syllabi, gaps, inconsistencies, the European Credit Transfer Accumulation System (ECTS), and the mandatory nature imply that not all pre-service teachers have the opportunity to address this topic.

The research literature has called for more consistency in training pre-service teachers to work with families, and our study supports these concerns by highlighting a lack of continuity among the syllabi. Based on findings from this study and the emergent literature in the field [38,39,41,74], our main recommendation for policy is related to the development of further and clearer standards for teachers' master's degree courses, and the inclusion of parent engagement competencies in teacher standards/certification requirements. Teacher preparation programs should incorporate and guarantee, besides internship practices, other opportunities to learn and practice FIPE. These opportunities should allow the development of family involvement competencies, and the understanding and appropriation of theoretical frameworks. Sometimes it is difficult to have specific and mandatory courses due to the already overcrowded curriculum [26]. However, the training of future teachers and the development of competencies in parental involvement must not be compromised. Therefore, space and time must be made available for them to learn, understand, and apply their knowledge.

We recognise that this study has some limitations. We analysed over 88% of the existing syllabi for early childhood educators' master's courses; however, we have little information regarding whether and how pre-service teachers are taught this topic in their classes. As a result, this study presents a broad picture rather than a detailed portrayal of how FIPE is addressed in Portuguese initial teacher education courses. More research is needed to identify how FIPE contents and goals are taught in pre-service teachers' master's degree programs. This study recommends additional research into how pre-service teachers' preparation happens, the shift from syllabus to practice, and how pre-service teachers perceive and experience FIPE in their initial teacher education courses. Further research on this key component is needed to achieve greater consistency in preparing early childhood educators to engage effectively with families.

This exploratory stage was fundamental to support our research, making room for the next steps: these involve a content analysis of interviews with initial teacher education master's coordinators and teachers and the implementation of a questionnaire to teaching students to get a view from the field encompassing different perspectives and actors.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.C., L.M. and F.P.; methodology, S.C., L.M. and F.P.; software, S.C.; validation, S.C., L.M. and F.P.; formal analysis, S.C., L.M. and F.P.; investigation, S.C.; resources, S.C.; writing—original draft preparation, S.C.; writing—review and editing, S.C., L.M. and F.P.; supervision, L.M. and F.P.; funding acquisition, S.C., L.M. and F.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by Portuguese national funds via Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) under Grant [<https://doi.org/10.54499/2020.06737.BD>] awarded to the first author; and Grants [<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04853/2020>], and [<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDP/04853/2020>] awarded to Research Centre in Education (CIE-ISPA).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of ISPA Research Ethics Committee [D-056-12-22]. The methods and procedures to be adopted respect human rights and the recommendations contained in national and international documents on research ethics.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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