

The ideal of educational partnerships

A critique of the current debate on cooperation between ECEC centers, primary schools and families

Tanja Betz, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (Germany)
On behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung



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Foreword

The family is the main environment that children grow up in – and therefore has a crucial impact on their education and development. At the same time, educational institutions are playing a greater role in children’s everyday lives. On average, children in Germany now begin attending an early childhood education and care (ECEC) facility sooner than was previously the case, and they are spending more time there and at school.

That means mothers and fathers, and practitioners, are now confronted with diverse and in some cases new demands. For example, parents are expected to select the proper educational institution for their child, communicate with teachers and practitioners, attend parent-teacher meetings and school events, and join any number of committees. It is the job of teachers and pedagogues in ECEC to persuade parents to enroll children in their childcare center or school, keep parents informed of how their children are not only developing but faring in general, provide mothers and fathers with advice, and make parents aware of other possibilities for receiving support or even offer that support themselves. They are also expected to work together on committees or in other bodies with parent representatives.

At first glance, the expectation that parents and educators should work together as equals for the wellbeing of children seems reasonable and apt. Yet the ideal of everyone collaborating as equal partners, which is currently dominating the debate on this issue in Germany, obscures an entire series of challenges and difficulties. Moreover, there has been too little research examining the cooperation between parents and educational institutions, both in its practical, everyday implementation and in terms of its impact. This is something the present study by Tanja Betz, professor in educational science at Goethe-University in Frankfurt am Main, makes clear. Within the framework of its analysis, the study critically questions the ideal of educational partnerships especially in Germany and shows the pressing need for additional research.

It thus demonstrates that, at the intersection of families and educational institutions, it is rarely a case of equal partners coming together to pursue identical goals by sharing institutional “power” – as today’s educational standards of good partnership would imply. The roles on both sides are too varied. Mothers and fathers have a different relationship to their children than educational professionals have. As a rule, parents are “pedagogical amateurs” while professionals have undergone extensive training and have considerable experience. Within the relevant institutions, parents cannot – and should not – have the same “power” and bear the same responsibilities as teachers and practitioners in ECEC. Mothers and fathers ultimately lack the time for regular contact with institutions and the confidence to get involved in them, and they often have other ideas of how responsibilities should be shared between families, on the one hand, and ECEC centers and primary schools, on the other. Conversely, in light of their numerous professional responsibilities, teachers and educational practitioners in ECEC often do not have time to engage with parents at length or to reflect on their interactions with them.



What all of this illustrates is that more light must be shed on the intersection of families and educational institutions. What are required are evidence-based analyses of the attitudes and ideas educational practitioners, teachers, mothers and fathers have when it comes to collaboration. Moreover, the research should not view parents as a “homogenous” group, but consider all of the diverse forms families can take. An empirical examination is also needed of which impacts the different types of cooperation have on all the relevant participants within the everyday processes taking place at ECEC facilities and primary schools. And finally, the question must be asked of how the children themselves feel about cooperation between parents and educators and to what degree it truly contributes to their wellbeing. After all, up until now children have not played a role – as independent actors – in the debate, especially in Germany; they have largely been the object of others’ cooperation.

These are the issues the Bertelsmann Stiftung will be addressing in the coming years as part of its project Families and Education: Creating Child-Centered Policies. Getting children’s living environments – i.e. families and educational institutions – to interact more effectively is a key challenge for educational policy-makers. The intersection of families and educational institutions is precisely the point where barriers can be found, such as different ideas of who should play what role, feedback from educators and grades that depend on a child’s background, and a lack of cultural sensitivity – all of which perpetuate educational inequalities. Our goal is to identify and help eliminate these educational barriers.



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Executive summary

Cooperation between teachers, educational practitioners and parents is a key and challenging aspect of the work done by the professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers and primary schools. At the same time, ensuring both public and private actors share responsibility for the way children grow up means integrating the different environments that children experience – especially if educational inequalities are to be reduced. To that extent it is not surprising that the partnership between ECEC centers, primary schools and families has been subject to increased attention at various levels in recent years. The *curricula* in use in Germany's states emphasize the necessity of increased collaboration. Numerous continuing education courses for teachers and educational practitioners in ECEC are being offered, and a wide range of program-related, practice-oriented literature is available, including manuals and how-to guides. Within the debate, the term “educational partnership” is often used – meaning that, in terms of how it is conceived and structured, the collaboration should be viewed as taking place between equal partners.

Overall, (increased) cooperation with parents is almost exclusively seen as positive by both the public and educational experts. In terms of the suggestions and recommendations being made, as well as the measures being implemented, there have been few if any critical voices questioning the motives underlying increased cooperation or the side effects resulting from it. Precisely this is the present study's point of departure. Its goal is to pose *critical* questions relating to the current debate especially in Germany and relating to the calls for increased collaboration between ECEC facilities, primary schools and families, especially considering the ideal of educational partnerships and the standard of effective cooperation currently being advocated. It will also explore existing empirical proof of the benefits of (increased) cooperation. The intention is to provide new, productive input for the discussion taking place among specialists and to develop starting points for a deeper empirical engagement with the phenomenon of collaboration. This can also be understood as a contribution towards taking a closer look at families and educational institutions – among other reasons, to better understand the complicated mechanisms that result in and perpetuate educational inequalities at this intersection.

Background and goals of demands for increased cooperation

In general, there are many goals that are meant to be achieved through (increased) cooperation. It is meant to help children expand their competencies, perform better and become more willing to learn, as a result of parents and educational institutions communicating better and sharing common goals. Other key factors are the joint support provided by parents and educational institutions and their targeted shaping of children's (personality) development. Improving the competencies of parents is yet another goal. The debate focuses on disadvantaged or poorly achieving children and their mothers and fathers, whom the increased collaboration is supposed to reach. The goal is to ensure better educational opportunities for all – and for disadvantaged children in particular.



Such partnerships thus suggest a *win-win situation* for educational institutions and for families. Yet the focus, especially in the ongoing debate in Germany, is actually on the institutions and their representatives, since both policy-makers and educational experts think and argue primarily in terms of the institutions and their political and social functions. It is, therefore, the educators and institutions that face, first and foremost, the challenge of achieving increased collaboration with parents. To that extent, the partnerships are primarily geared towards ensuring that everyday activities in the classroom and at ECEC facilities go smoothly – and not necessarily towards ensuring the wellbeing of the children. For example, when students are more willing to learn and parents identify more strongly with the school and its daily activities, then teaching becomes easier.

Robustness of the empirical evidence for more cooperation

Empirical proof is taken from very diverse contexts to reinforce arguments for increased cooperation. Upon closer examination, however, the empirical basis “per se” proves not to be robust, but thin and fragmentary because of the wide range of goals pursued, among other reasons. In light of current findings, virtually no empirical conclusions can be drawn about the vast majority of ECEC facilities and primary schools and their multifaceted practices – neither regarding the actual form that collaboration and educational partnerships take on a daily basis, nor about the relevant attitudes of teachers, practitioners and administrators or the impacts and secondary effects that different forms of cooperation have.

Numerous publications in German speaking countries and arguments in favor of *more* cooperation with parents take as their point of departure the empirical fact that family background is closely tied to participation in ECEC facilities and primary schools and that the family has a significant influence on the probability of a child’s success in the educational system. These findings are, in and of themselves, not sufficient to justify from an empirical perspective increased collaboration or educational partnerships, since other forms of professional engagement or institution-related changes could be the “solution” for reaching the goals meant to be achieved through cooperation.

Another difficulty is that the partnership-related goals are very ambitious and, in some cases, the results will only become apparent in the distant future. Moreover, up until now collaboration has taken place in multifaceted forms and highly diverse settings. Empirical results are also often conflated – and findings that apply to a specific region or that only apply to smaller subgroups are given wide-ranging interpretations. Studies from different countries are often quickly offered up as “clear” proof of the positive impact that involving families has, although they can only be brought to bear on the specific situation and specific circumstances in Germany with great difficulty. In sum, too little is still known about the diverse manifestations and impacts of collaboration in Germany, and there continues to be a pressing need for additional research as a result.

Standards of good cooperation and their unknown drawbacks

The analysis found here looks at the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships developed by the US-based Parent Teacher Association. These standards are also used in the German debate. On the basis of these standards it is possible to take a critical look at the topic of cooperation and identify required future research from the perspective of social science.

1. Success through cooperation – A partnership among equals

According to this standard, good cooperation means that all parents are seen as equal partners to teachers and practitioners. On the one hand, the role of parents in their children's education and development is thereby semantically upgraded to the position of equal partners, which simultaneously makes it more difficult for them to (legitimately) decline to cooperate. On the other hand, the professionals (teachers and practitioners) are placed on the same level as the “pedagogical amateurs” (parents). This is clearly at odds with the ongoing professionalization debate, which strives for an unambiguous differentiation between the two groups. At the same time, the idea of an equal partnership obscures hierarchical differences and power structures.

Moreover, parents are expected to become “better” parents by participating in training courses and heeding the relevant information and exhortations. That means, in keeping with the standards, they are to pursue first and foremost the goal of ensuring their children do well in school and later have “good” occupations, thereby enjoying a privileged status in society. This applies particularly to disadvantaged and immigrant parents. They are depicted as unknowing, i.e. the ones who lack knowledge of the (German) expectations that apply to ECEC facilities, schools and families, as well as an understanding of the “right” way to support and educate their children. This results in clear ideas of how “good” parents should act, thereby promoting a standardization of parenthood that devalues alternate ideas of childhood and child-rearing, as well as of adulthood.

Ultimately, these calls to eliminate differences in status are not aware of the complexity of social relationships. Status differences do not first arise during conversations about child-rearing and education, but are only replicated there. They are part of societal power relations that all participants are involved in and that parents and educators are aware of, at least in part; in particular, they structure – implicitly and on the basis of the habitus of – what parents and professionals believe and how they act.

2. Power-sharing – Appropriate inclusion of all concerns and decisions

According to this standard, parents and educators should act together and as equal partners regardless of the institutional issue at hand. Yet this ignores the fact that parents and professionals – whether at ECEC centers or primary schools – each have a different relationship to the



child. They play different roles and have different interests and emotional connections to the child. Moreover, a critical examination is needed of which parents can and do get involved in the various responsibilities and opportunities for participating in educational institutions, and the manner in which they do so.

Empirical findings show that a true sharing of power is not possible and is rarely pursued by teachers and educational practitioners. They also show that support and involvement on the part of parents is desired more in educational areas of marginal importance and not in the relevant core areas (classroom learning, everyday activities in ECEC, development of new concepts, etc.). Sporadic opportunities for participating cannot, however, result in power-sharing as described in the standards. Moreover, the call for power-sharing is at odds with the current trend especially in Germany towards replicating in ECEC facilities the same professional disparity between educators and parents that has long existed in schools.

3. Parents as advocates for every child

The goal of this standard – a hallmark of good cooperation – is to empower parents so they can act to ensure *all children* have the opportunities they need to learn and develop to their fullest. In terms of this collective form of cooperation and participation, there is currently little research in Germany that goes beyond self-assessments of how often parents participate in committees and other bodies and how satisfying they find that participation to be.

In terms of inequality theory, which assumes educational disparities between children of different social and migration-related backgrounds, it is conceivable that a better structural anchoring of parents' rights in collective terms could also reduce the imbalance between educational institutions and parents – especially in schools. The challenge would be to achieve this by creating participatory methods and practices on a broad scale. Ascertaining if and to what extent such ideas could be effectively applied on a practical level, and what their consequences might be, is something that will have to wait until the relevant empirical research has been carried out.

4. Challenges of creating a culture of welcome and wellbeing

The standards for good collaboration emphasize the creation of a culture of welcome and wellbeing, which must take place both on the institutional level (appropriately designed entrances at educational facilities, opportunities for parents to meet, etc.) and the communicative and emotional level. According to this standard, all parents should feel comfortable and appreciated as part of the school or ECEC community. In establishing a culture of welcome and wellbeing, it would be necessary in the future to examine more closely the attitudes, mindsets, points of view and patterns of interpretation found among mothers and fathers of different backgrounds. This would provide insight into how and when they feel comfortable and welcome.

A differentiated consideration of these aspects has, however, been generally lacking in the German debate until now. The literature notes in greatly simplified terms instead that it is usually the less privileged parents and immigrant parents who are only reached with great difficulty or not at all. At the same time, those findings receive less attention that show neither background (native/non-native) nor educational level play a role in terms of reaching parents.

It must also be remembered that a culture of welcome and wellbeing can have its drawbacks, as recent research shows. A culture of wellbeing can in fact be counterproductive, especially when it comes to reducing educational inequalities. What would be more appropriate (as the present study demonstrates) would be to leave and/or problematize the comfort zone of parents and teachers in order to give children better opportunities.





5. Close, effective communication

An ongoing, in-depth exchange between educators and parents is a further standard for good cooperation. An issue which must be problematized here is that parents are often viewed as a homogenous group and their differences, including their specific life circumstances, are not taken into account, i.e. the same standards are applied to all parents. Yet different social groups have varying attitudes towards the role parents should play and towards which responsibilities should fall to the parents and which to the ECEC facility or school. It must also be assumed that parents have different expectations of the impact they can have, i.e. the goals they can achieve through their own involvement and/or actions.

On the other hand, the intensity of the exchange and collaboration also depends on the parents' current life circumstances, their individual biographies, their experiences in and with institutions, their ability to speak the language relevant to institutions, their own competencies (as they perceive them) and the amount of time they have to participate (e.g. because of work commitments). These differences must be accounted for, along with the fact that when actors within the educational community call for greater collaboration, it is often mothers alone who are addressed and greater pressure is often put on them than on fathers. Parents should not be viewed as a homogenous group. To that extent, there can never be quality standards for cooperation that apply to *all* parents.

Practitioners, teachers, parents – and the children?

It is striking that, within the discussion at least in Germany, almost all arguments are based on children's wellbeing and their later success, giving the debate a strong focus on the future. Children's present experiences in educational institutions and the family are often ignored, and there is virtually no discussion of the fact that no absolute criterion can exist for ensuring the children's wellbeing. The children themselves are not included in the discussion, neither conceptually nor empirically. Their specific position remains unconsidered in the efforts to increase collaboration and create educational partnerships – among adults. Children become the objects of cooperation instead and are not systematically included as participants in their own right, or even as partners.

It would therefore be worthwhile to include *children's perspective(s)* in the debate and developments on "cooperating for their wellbeing". Calls for increased cooperation and educational partnerships, and the developments leading in that direction, must be problematized and empirically examined from the vantage point of children and their position within the overall structure of educational institutions and the family. The advantages and disadvantages of increased collaboration need to be illuminated from their perspective. One positive outcome could be, for example, that children would be able to exert more influence because of this collaboration, i.e. adults would serve as resources for children, helping them change problematic aspects of their institution-related experiences and family life. Conversely, increased collaboration could also infringe on children's

privacy and increase the degree to which they are “exposed” as both children and learners. They would in some cases no longer be in a position to represent themselves. As these considerations illustrate, empiric research of children’s perspective(s) could provide the discussion with new momentum.

Outlook

In terms of both policy-making and practice, a key task is shaping the intersection of educational institutions and families and, in particular, redressing educational inequalities as they arise and become established there. In order to drive the relevant developments, the debate in Germany and beyond must focus more intensely on what the hallmarks of *good* cooperation between educators and parents are for promoting children’s wellbeing, as well as *for whom* it is good and *which goals* it serves.

This would require empirical research into the perspectives of mothers and fathers and their attitudes towards educators and educational institutions, as well as the perspectives and attitudes of *teachers and practitioners* and the perspectives of *children*. These various vantage points must be examined against the background of the relevant familial conditions, such as limited financial resources and time, and overall institutional conditions. This (empirical) view would also have to focus on the materials, resources and background conditions relating to the professional work. It would also be worthwhile to gain insight into structures that promote or hinder cooperation, into the times educators “must” be available and, generally, into the relevant financial, human and spacial resources necessary for cooperating and for creating and expanding a culture of welcome and wellbeing.

Too many challenges, problems and “pitfalls” are clearly being ignored in the current debate on increased cooperation, to some extent because of the positive and seemingly harmonious image educational partnerships offer – something the present analysis makes clear. With that, the discussion also seems to be diverting attention from structural problems – for example, from the underfunding of educational institutions, the systemic difficulties occurring at the relevant intersections, and the division of responsibilities in the political sphere, which largely reflects divisions among policy-making fields. Calling for increased collaboration cannot compensate for or overcome these structural problems. More to the point, such collaboration cannot be realized without a significant commitment of time and money, once again leading to the issue of adequate resources. After all, parent-education efforts and home visits – as well as regular, extensive communication with parents on subjects such as their child’s developmental – take time, not to mention preparation and follow-up activities on the part of practitioners and teachers. At the same time, it would also be necessary to problematize the challenging demands made by institutions, the often negative qualities attributed to parents, and inadequate performance on the part of families.



More detailed (empirical) research into these key interrelated issues is therefore necessary, research that takes a critical look at the basic assumptions of the debate up until now and focuses more on the structural conditions in families and educational institutions and, above all, on the actors most immediately involved, especially the children.

1. Introduction and goal of the study

Cooperation between early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers, primary schools and families has in recent years received greater attention on a number of levels.

This can be seen on the *political and legal level – in the case of Germany –*, which to varying degrees determines the cooperation between educational institutions and parents through *laws governing child welfare*, state laws governing implementation and the *states' education acts*.¹ These legal requirements are accompanied by the states' *education plans*, all of which, almost without exception, emphasize to some degree cooperation with parents in the ECEC and primary school contexts in the guise of *educational partnerships*.² The policy-making documents stress that the goal is, in particular, to ensure better educational opportunities for all children.

At the same time, these discussions of collaboration focus mainly on disadvantaged children at ECEC facilities and on low-achievers in primary schools and (thus) mostly children of non-native heritage and their parents. The *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany* released a statement³ in 2013 together with organizations representing people of non-German heritage that calls for the development of educational partnerships, especially with parents of non-German heritage, in light of the significant role that parents have been shown to play in ensuring successful participation and achievement in the educational system.

An increased focus on partnerships with parents can also be discerned among *educational practitioners* and *education experts*. This is made apparent by the vast amount of often programmatic *practice-related literature*, geared towards those involved in ECEC in particular, literature written for university students, ECEC staff, teachers, continuing-education trainers, funders, service providers and educational authorities.⁴ The publications include *pamphlets*, *how-to guides* and *manuals* which have been recently published in rapid succession for both the ECEC and primary sectors and which have frequently been used to develop policy-making recommendations.⁵ Here, as on the political level, a strong focus can be seen on the perceived need for partnerships with parents of non-native heritage and on strengthening those partnerships.⁶

1 For an overview of the legal basis for cooperation with parents in the area of ECEC see e.g. Friederich (2011: 14f.); in the area of primary education see e.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 7f.).

2 See Viernickel et al. (2013: 126ff.); for terminology e.g. Sacher (2014a and 2014b); Stange (2012).

3 The statement is available (in German) at: http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2013/2013-10-10-Gemeinsame_Erklaerung-KMK-Migrantenverbaende-Schule-Eltern.pdf (accessed April 15, 2015)

4 E.g. Deutsches Jugendinstitut (2011), Stange et al. (2013), Völkel/Wihstutz (2014).

5 This includes the publications Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung (n.d.); Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland (2013); Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Bayerischen Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst (2014); Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel (2014) and, as an example of non-German/Australian materials, Catholic Education Office Melbourne (2013).

6 E.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a and 2014b).



Recent *surveys of educational practitioners and administrators* at ECEC facilities show the considerable importance various aspects of partnerships with parents have, as well as the difficulties that arise in everyday educational settings.⁷ The increased relevance of collaboration can also be seen in the high number of continuing-education courses on this topic at ECEC facilities (see e.g. Cloos/Karner 2010a: 182; Betz 2015). Finally, the increase in the number of family centers is causing more attention to be given to cooperating with parents and addressing them generally (Diller/Heitkötter & Rauschenbach 2008; Cloos/Karner 2010b).

On the *academic level*, it is apparent that collaboration with parents at educational institutions is also a relevant *topic*, even if this remains the subject of limited *research*.⁸ Most research focuses on *practice*, in particular practices used at ECEC facilities. Only sporadically can *basic research* or research with a more theoretical or a scientific/systematizing focus be found.⁹ Once again it is striking that a close connection exists between the topic of collaborating with parents and migration- and integration-related issues (e.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2014a).

Thus, there is a lively debate taking place in Germany on a number of levels about increased cooperation between ECEC centers, primary schools and families. At the same time, numerous concrete changes can be observed on the legal and administrative levels and in the field, changes that can be seen, for example, in how educational plans are approached and how the educational partnerships proclaimed there are realized in everyday professional settings.¹⁰

“Educational partnerships” has in many cases become the preferred term, since it makes clear that cooperative activities should be designed and implemented among partners.¹¹ A review of the relevant literature is enough to reveal the preference for the term “partnership”: The (increased) cooperation with parents is cast only in positive terms, and there are few critical voices commenting on the recommendations and tips, not to mention the activities that have already been

7 E.g. Viernickel et al. (2013) and Beher/Walter (2012). The latter show in their study that administrators feel confident and/or competent when they enter into an exchange with parents and practitioners about a child’s development. However, they perceive greater difficulties when they must deal with parents who have specific child-rearing challenges (e.g. family problems), when creating opportunities for parents to get involved and, in particular, when carrying out programs in the area of family education (ibid.: 22). Educational practitioners view themselves more critically when it comes to the various aspects of collaborating with parents. For them as well, discussing a child’s development with parents and other professionals is easier than creating opportunities for parents to get involved. They feel less confident when collaborating with parents who have child-rearing challenges and when carrying out programs in the area of family education (ibid.: 29f.). Overall, however, both administrators and staff say they feel quite confident and competent when dealing with various professional challenges (see also Betz 2015 for practitioners in ECEC).

8 Academic studies on partnerships with parents are relatively rare compared to other issues in the area of ECEC and primary education.

9 For literature in English, see e.g. Nawrotzki (2012); Vincent/Tomlinson (1997); see also Cloos/Karner (2010b) for a basic discussion of the relationship between at-home child-rearing and public childcare, as well as the studies by Andresen (e.g. 2014), which belong to the field of child-rearing-related family research.

10 See Viernickel et al. (2013). In their study they examine how educators approach the task of building educational partnerships with parents as laid out in educational plans. The changes also include, in the broadest sense, the awarding of the German School Prize for highly innovative schools and the Karl Kübel Prize for outstanding early childhood practices and strategies implemented by institutions or initiatives, even if collaboration with parents is not an explicit criterion for bestowing the prizes.

11 See e.g. Friedrich (2011); Sacher (2014a and 2014b); Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2012).

implemented – voices that would thus add to the debate the underlying motives for increased collaboration and its possible side effects.¹² This is the impetus for the current study, which uses as its point of departure the importance of cooperation, which is referenced on both the professional and political levels and which underlies how partnerships with parents are framed and developed at ECEC facilities and primary schools. The study's aim is to *critically question from the perspective of social science* the current debate in Germany and beyond and the demands for *increased* cooperation among ECEC centers, elementary schools and families, especially in light of the ideal of educational partnerships.

The approach taken in the study is to critique the current debate, an approach that includes an *intentional concentration* on basic patterns, implicit norms and blind spots within the debate and, as a result, a *problem-oriented analysis*. This also makes it possible to shed light on the side effects of prevailing attitudes towards collaboration and educational partnerships in order to bring *constructive new ideas and momentum* to the discussion taking place among educators and others. Based on the analysis, suggestions are advanced for *empirically researching* the phenomenon of collaboration and educational partnerships with parents.

The study begins with a description of the scope of the analysis, thereby limiting the field of observation (Chapter 2). The goals, underlying factors and challenges relating to the calls for more cooperation are then examined (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 takes a critical look at the empirical foundations of the current debate in order to explore the standards of *good* cooperation, along with their underlying principles and recommendations for the future (Chapter 5). Possibilities for research that could reinforce the future discussion from an empirical point of view are also noted. Chapter 6 examines the role, as yet overlooked, that children at ECEC facilities and primary schools have to play in the debate on cooperation between parents and professionals. In conclusion, Chapter 7 offers a problem-oriented summary and an outlook of key points that will play a role in evidence-informed discussions of collaboration in the future.

¹² One of the few exceptions is a contribution by Cloos/Karner (2010a) and one by Andresen (2014). Krüger et al. (2012) also list a number of critical points, even if they do not take the next step and apply these points systematically to the debate and, for example, the articles that appear in their publications on educational partnerships (Stange et al. 2012; 2013). Compare also the critical objections to educational partnerships at ECEC centers in Kalicki (2010).



2. Definitional constraints and terminology

When one takes a closer look at partnerships between parents and professionals at educational institutions, it quickly becomes evident that defining and structuring the topic is rife with difficulty. This is not only because, as noted, myriad publications on the subject exist, but also because numerous terms are employed, many of them simultaneously in various German-speaking countries without their commonalities and differences having been adequately clarified.¹³ The same terms are not always used to discuss the same issues and sometimes emphasize very different aspects of educational partnerships.

While in general this diversity¹⁴ is conducive to the debate, it makes a well-founded and critical exploration of the topic more difficult since there is much that can be discussed under the broad rubric of “cooperation with parents.” The difficulty stems from the fact that it is rarely possible to apprehend and assess the “good reasons” for more collaboration often advanced in the debate. This becomes particularly clear when one considers that empirical findings on the different forms and characteristics of partnership are conflated and used as proof of the *necessity* and *efficacy* of cooperation per se. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain where the topic of partnerships with parents fits in or what it includes when it comes to the broad, multilayered discussion of expanding ECEC facilities and (all-day) primary schools and ensuring quality instruction there, or the responsibility public and private actors bear in educating children.

Various aspects of educational activities, such as the responsibility recently assigned to educational professionals at ECEC centers to observe children and document what they find or to network with other actors in the children’s social environment, are portrayed, on the one hand, as prerequisites for collaboration and thereby as one of its key elements (see e.g. DKJS n.d.). On the other hand, these aspects are conceived and discussed as independent areas of professional actions that are only indirectly connected to the topic of cooperation.¹⁵

The justifications for more cooperation (see Chapter 3) refer both specifically to the core areas of communication and cooperation between parents and professionals and to the professional development of teachers and educational practitioners. Sometimes, however, they also reference debates that only indirectly have to do with the topic of collaboration, such as parents’ increased need for assistance, the economic benefits to society of ECEC outside of the family and the need for better work-life balance (see Stange 2012; Sacher 2014b).

13 See e.g. Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel (2014); Pietsch/Ziesemer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff (2010); Stange (2012). Similar fuzziness exists in English-speaking countries. Many terms are used without systematic differentiation, such as parent(al) involvement, parent participation, parent engagement, family involvement, family-school partnership (see e.g. Emerson et al. 2012; Sacher 2014a).

14 The diversity of terminology is not only inherent to the topic of cooperation; it is also characteristic of many fields relating to education and the social sciences.

15 See, too, the difficulties described in footnote 20.

Working definition and scope of the study

For the purposes of this study, *cooperation between parents and professionals is understood to mean all forms of (organized) communication and/or cooperation between ECEC centers, primary schools and families or between educational practitioners, teachers and mothers and fathers or those responsible for a child's education* (see Stange 2012).

In both the analysis and arguments advanced here, the ECEC and primary levels are treated as one, and overall patterns, issues, secondary effects and blind spots are examined from an “external” perspective. In so doing, it is not necessary to differentiate whether

- the communication and/or collaboration results from a problematic situation (e.g. poor grades in school or a difficult relationship with an educator at an ECEC facility) or if it is continuous, i.e. permanent or takes place at regular intervals, or
- the communication and/or collaboration takes place primarily in educational institutions (e.g. during scheduled meetings with parents on site or during informal meetings in the institution such as in “parent cafes”) or when teachers and/or educational practitioners visit families at home.

To identify the logic underlying the debate, it is also not necessary to examine the type of communication or collaboration in detail, e.g. whether it takes place in the form of educational agreements, contracts, participation in elected bodies, individual meetings, parent conferences or joint efforts to shape transitions between educational venues.¹⁶ Moreover, no distinction is made between collaboration that takes place within a legal framework and activities that are freely initiated by the participating parties.

Not included is an exploration of specific types of venues, such as family centers and all-day schools, as “special” institutions for greater cooperation.¹⁷ Similarly, the topic of embedding partnerships with parents and other educational partners in the community or region¹⁸ – as part of regional educational associations (Schwaiger/Neumann 2011: 84) and local-level education and prevention chains (Stange 2012: 36; Sacher 2014b), among other possibilities – is also not discussed in greater detail. These developments, often specific to Germany, are so multifaceted that they cannot be properly addressed in a relatively brief problem-oriented analysis, but require a separate analysis instead.

¹⁶ For more on the various forms of cooperation, see e.g. Kirk (2011); Pietsch/Ziesemer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff (2010).

¹⁷ For a current study on participation at all-day schools see Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a). The study *Familien als Akteure in der Ganztagsgrundschule* (Families as Actors in All-Day Schools) by Sabine Andresen, Martina Richter and Hans-Uwe Otto should also be mentioned here (see Andresen 2014: 161ff.).

¹⁸ In this context, some argue (see Textor 2014) that parents, educators and providers of psychological or social services should work together with a focus on the child (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, collective forms of parental participation are also discussed in this context, e.g. when calls are made for parental representatives “[to be] included in the school’s [or ECEC facility’s] social, political and external networks” (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013: 19, bracketed information added). Embedding and locating the collaboration between parents and professionals in a larger context is based on (socio-) ecological models (see Epstein 2011), which assume that children’s development as well as their learning and “outcomes” are influenced by different, overlapping contexts (see Emerson et al. 2012: 17 ff.).



The central objective of this study is to identify the basic patterns and logic found within the current debate especially in Germany and, by carrying out a problem-oriented analysis on the discursive level, draw attention to the debate's imbalances, blind spots and secondary effects.

3. Background and goals of calls for increased cooperation

Not only has the topic of (increased) communication and cooperation between parents and educators arisen, it is now widespread. Why this is so and the arguments for why cooperation is needed can be explained by professional considerations and by factors relating to educational, social and integration policies. Economic considerations are also fueling the debate.¹⁹

Overall, there is a complex of goals that is meant to be achieved through (increased) cooperation. The goals derive from the overriding effort to minimize educational inequality and to improve educational outcomes in general (Nawrotzki 2012), with the latter serving as the objective of educational, social, economic and integration policies. In practical terms, this means increasing children's achievement and their willingness to learn through better communication and by having parents and educational institutions work together to achieve the relevant goals (e.g. Emerson et al. 2012: 8 f.; Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013). Other key objectives are jointly supporting children's (personality) development and influencing it in a targeted manner (e.g. Emerson et al. 2012; Pietsch/Ziesemer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff 2010; PTA 2014; Sacher 2014a; Stange 2012, Textor 2014), as well as supporting children as they make their way to adulthood (DKJS n.d.; Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Bayerischen Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014). Another often-mentioned goal is increasing parents' competencies (e.g. Bargsten 2012).²⁰

In the Vodafone Stiftung's *Kompass für die partnerschaftliche Zusammenarbeit von Schule und Elternhaus (Compass for the Home-School Partnership)*, the benefits of cooperation are concisely stated: "Everyone [gains] from regular, constructive collaboration between school and home [...]: Students are more willing to learn and perform better, parents identify more with the school's endeavors and teachers therefore receive support for their 'core business': classroom instruction."²¹

This quote is exemplary of one of the key lines of argument used in discussing partnerships and it shows, first, that collaboration is not an objective in and of itself, but is associated with *specific goals and impacts*, including ECEC facilities and families. The actual achievement of these goals through partnerships therefore *needs to be proven*, e.g. through evaluations. Yet there has been too little open, critical discussion of the studies examining this topic and the robustness of the findings on collaboration's impacts (see Chapter 4).

19 In terms of economic aspects, see for example Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Bayerischen Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst (2014) and the educational plan for the state of Hesse (Hessisches Sozialministerium/Hessisches Kultusministerium 2007).

20 The ambiguity and lack of a systematic approach in the debate on greater cooperation becomes clear when one sees how the goals, requirements and forms of cooperation are conflated. Bargsten (2012), for example, states that giving parents a say and having them help shape activities in educational institutions are goals of educational partnerships, while others classify them as a form of the partnerships themselves (cf. the difficulties outlined in Chapter 2).

21 Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland (2013: 1). This assertion is not entirely tenable as such, since the empirical evidence is too weak to affirm such a win-win situation, at least in the German-speaking countries.



Second, the quote makes clear that even though semantically it is about “everyone” benefitting from partnerships, *educational institutions and their representatives* are the ones who gain in particular. For example, if students are more willing to learn and parents identify more with the school and its mandate, teaching is easier. Cooperation is thus supposed to guarantee that schools function smoothly and, at the same time, that student achievement is higher.²² Similar institutional objectives are also conceivable at ECEC centers, and empirical findings to this end are already available.²³



²² Findings from the IFS study show that a school’s educational team is more willing to embrace new forms of cooperation if the forms promise rapid results and fewer problems (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2014a: 22). Similar results can be found in the study by Viernickel et al. (2013) (see footnote 23).

²³ Viernickel et al. (2013) show that there are administrators and staff at ECEC facilities who are in favor of collaboration when parents support their work (organizationally) and follow their recommendations (ibid.: 139f.).

Calls for more collaboration are thereby concerned with, third, *the future*, i.e. the future success – initially in school, then in the world of work and in terms of social status – of individual children and/or a parent’s own child, or, in the case of institutional forms of cooperation, of the younger generation (see e.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2014a: 5). This focus on the future also explains the considerable interest in the topic among policy-makers.

When it comes to young children in particular, the discussion is about how early contact between parents and institutions – i.e. beginning at ECEC facilities – can lead to stable, long-term relationships between the relevant parties (see Edwards 2002).²⁴ Using increased collaboration to achieve a better relationship between parents and professionals or between parents, professionals and children – a relationship that is largely *concerned with the present* – is, however, of less importance and is not the focus of the current debate.

Clearly, the focus is on the institutional perspective when it comes to addressing and problematizing partnerships *between* parents and institutions or educational partnerships themselves. Both policy-makers and educators think and argue in terms of the institutions’ political and social functions when parents and professionals are to communicate and collaborate, or even if they are already successfully doing so.²⁵ This explains why the literature concentrates on topics such as the types of cooperation on offer, the competencies professionals need to communicate and the types of parents that institutions consider “hard to reach.” The challenge of actually increasing collaboration with parents is thus one faced by teachers, educational practitioners and institutions. It is therefore surprising that some publications are also directed at parents, such as the educational plan of the state of Hesse and the guidelines for ensuring quality partnerships with parents published by the Karl Kübel Stiftung and the Vodafone Stiftung (Hessisches Sozialministerium/Hessisches Kultusministerium 2007; Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel 2014 – for one interpretation see Section 5.2).

Given the strong institutional perspective inherent to the topic, it is crucial that mothers and fathers be persuaded to participate in a partnership *in the present*. Thus the prospect of their child’s later success – in school and in life – is used to make cooperating attractive to parents, and increased cooperation is presented as the way to achieve that goal. The problems ensuing from such a premise are apparent.

For example, it is difficult, on the one hand, to reach parents who are already convinced their child will be successful, i.e. without any additional cooperation. On the other, it is just as hard to reach parents who are convinced that greater cooperation or any other sort of communication and partnership would be insufficient or ineffective in helping their child.

²⁴ This hope is, however, thwarted by systemic obstacles, namely immanent transitions (between nursery school and ECEC center, ECEC center and primary school, primary school and secondary school, etc.) that confront both children and parents after each transition with new staff, new duties and new institutions, including new institutional cultures, all of which makes having long-term relationships throughout the system impossible.

²⁵ Numerous positive examples of partnerships are cited in the literature (see e.g. Sacher 2014b: 571).



Moreover, teachers and educational practitioners must be convinced to give the partnership the key role in their professional work, as policy-makers and education experts say should be the case. Equally relevant is whether teachers and educational practitioners²⁶ hope for specific results from greater cooperation, or whether they prefer and pursue other measures; also relevant is the extent to which they believe that institutional conditions support or prevent partnerships.

²⁶ Or if administrators are convinced of the effectiveness of increased cooperation for achieving the stated goals. The significance of the administrative level is highlighted by, among others, Viernickel et al. (2013) in their study.

4. Robustness of the empirical evidence for “More cooperation!”

Since partnerships with parents have been legally mandated in Germany, yet are not considered valuable in and of themselves within the educational debate but gain legitimacy mostly as a means to an end, attempts are often made in the literature to invoke empirical evidence supporting cooperation and providing clear proof of its effectiveness. This empirical proof and the empirical basis for the debate contain, however, a number of “pitfalls” that, until now, have only been identified or explored to a limited extent.

First, numerous publications and the calls for greater collaboration with parents take as their starting point the empirical fact that family background correlates closely to the level of participation at ECEC facilities and primary schools and that the family plays a significant role in determining how successful children will be within the educational system (e.g. Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel 2014: 6; Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2012: 1). Depending on the study, roughly 30 to 50 percent of school achievement is ascribed to the home, the attitudes present there and the manner of child-rearing involved, and only 10 percent to the school’s basic activity: classroom instruction.²⁷ These empirical facts, which clearly highlight the significance of the family for children’s education, cannot be discounted. Yet they are not sufficient per se as an empirical basis for justifying *greater* cooperation – especially in the form of educational partnerships – since other professional activities or institution-related changes could be the “solution” to reaching the goals meant to be achieved through partnerships.

Second, it must be noted that the evidence is multifaceted and ambivalent and that, despite what is often suggested, collaboration does not always have only positive effects.²⁸ In terms of research examining ECEC centers, there is relatively solid evidence demonstrating the positive impacts of *special* programs and initiatives designed to support families (e.g. OPSTAPJE or Rucksack²⁹) and, individually, the positive impacts of children and family centers using *targeted* approaches such as Early Excellence (see Durand/Eden & Staeger 2011). In contrast, there is little empirical evidence and, above all, no evaluative studies exist of *everyday collaboration at the vast majority of ECEC facilities*, which rely on widely used methods such as informal interactions or annual parent-teacher conferences. Very little is thus known about the actual impacts of collaboration between parents and professionals.

In terms of schools, many aspects of cooperation have been demonstrated to have a clear impact. For example, in-school performance has been shown to improve overall as a result of interventions such as child-rearing courses and when support is provided to parents for their child-rearing

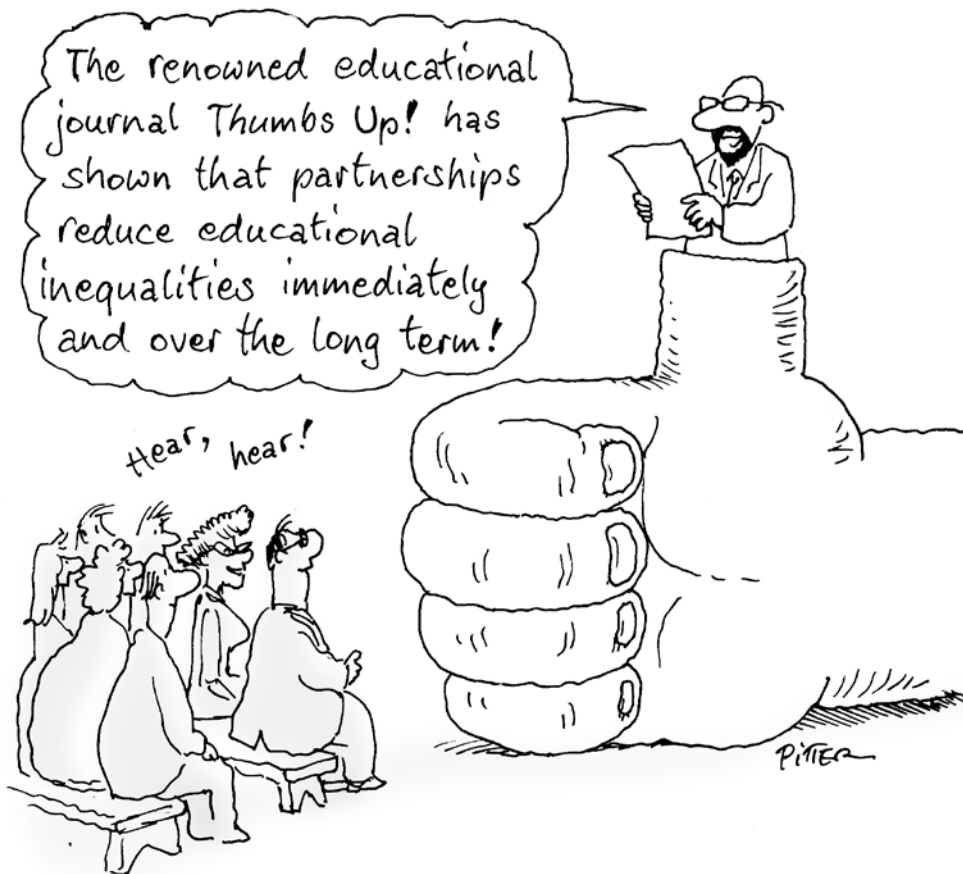
27 Neuenschwander (2009, 2010); Sacher (2014a); see Emerson et al. (2012) for an overview of international studies; Nawrotzki (2012).

28 In terms of negative consequences, compare the studies by Emerson et al. (2012: 15f.); Heekerens (2010).

29 For an overview see e.g. Pietsch/Zieseemer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff (2010); Betz (2010).



practices, as well as when parents' expectations are clarified and "adjusted" to reflect institutional requirements and expectations.³⁰ Clear evidence is lacking, however, for other areas and other aspects of cooperation. For example, collaborating or having close contact with parents *does not necessarily* or *directly* lead to children's success in school, or at least the desired success, something that is also true when parents are present at school and when a good relationship exists between home and school (see Sacher 2014a).



30 For an overview see Emerson et al. (2012); Sacher (2014a: 16ff.).

How varied the evidence can be is illustrated by the problem of hard-to-reach parents, an issue that has been investigated, at least in part. The assertion is virtually omnipresent in the literature that less privileged parents and parents of non-native heritage are primarily the ones who are not reached, or only reached with great difficulty, by the programs and initiatives offered by educational institutions.³¹ In contrast, Werner Sacher has shown in his representative survey in Bavaria that, when it comes to the issue of whether they are hard to reach, there are no differences between parents of native and non-native heritage and between those who are “educationally deprived”³² and those who are not.³³

Third, (evaluative) studies often do not work with “hard” quantitative data that can demonstrate the effects of collaboration, but are based on self-assessments or (self-)observations.³⁴ This is not a general criticism of this avenue of research, since the empirical discussion of partnerships should encompass more than purely evaluation-oriented empirics. It is more that responses to questions about attitudes and findings from self-assessments (e.g. “Which impact of the partnership have you experienced, as teacher, administrator, etc.?”)³⁵ cannot serve as a solid, empirical basis for calling for more cooperation, since they do not supply sufficient information about *how* the cooperation is being realized on site. For this to be the case, observations and/or ethnographic approaches would be required that are only available to a very limited degree.

Another difficulty is, fourth, proving the benefits of collaboration. This is because – as shown above (see Chapter 3) – the bar has been set very high and the desired effects are hard to grasp or to verify empirically for a variety of reasons, including the applicable time dimension (i.e. the positive effects of cooperation are often relegated to the distant future). It must also be noted that partnerships take a wide range of forms and are sometimes carried out in very diverse settings. Yet the empirical findings are all conflated, and findings that apply only regionally or only to small subsections of the debate are generously interpreted and used as general proof for the *necessity* and *efficacy* of greater collaboration per se.³⁶

Fifth, it must be remembered that the empirical basis for the debate is, in general, very thin. Moreover, findings from abroad that are often used to reinforce arguments (e.g. the Perry Preschool Project) are taken to be “clear” proof of the positive impact of greater cooperation or including families. Applying them to the overall German context³⁷ is problematic, however, especially to the state or local level or to individual institutions. It would be more fitting to clearly note the considerable gap in research in terms of the different forms, conditions and impacts and the different levels

31 See e.g. Vincent/Tomlinson (1997); Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014b: 7f.).

32 For more on the difficulty of defining this term see footnote 42.

33 Sacher (2014a: 147 f.). Differences in “reachability” do, however, exist and depend in particular on the type of school involved and the child’s age: “hard-to-reach” parents can be found most often at private schools and at upper secondary schools, i.e. among older children (see *ibid.*).

34 See e.g. Durand/Eden & Staeger (2011); Gomolla (2010); Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a).

35 For more on this method, see Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 21, 38).

36 For a critical view, cf. Nawrotzki (2012: 75); Cloos/Karner (2010a).

37 See Heekerens (2010: 317).



and different perspectives – especially in light of the tendency, on the part of both institutions and others, to approach cooperation as a partnership – and to rectify the situation using a combination of basic and applied research³⁸ (see Chapter 7). In fact, a number of existing studies have virtually no theoretical foundation. This is an indication that practice-oriented applied research has predominated until now, while basic research has not been sufficiently carried out, despite the fact that basic research tends to focus on, and is alone capable of, achieving a deeper understanding of empirically observed phenomena and their (purported) theoretical correlations.³⁹

Major representative studies with the potential for extrapolation are lacking, as are smaller qualitative and/or quantitative studies that examine the challenges of cooperation in educational institutions from a range of perspectives. This means that researchers face the same challenging questions as do educational practitioners: How is it possible to make contact with “hard-to-reach” mothers and fathers (see Andresen 2014: 165)? To whom does this description, seen from the institutional perspective, actually apply? How is it possible to carry out unbiased research with parents or from the parents’ perspective, given that basic assumptions are no longer questioned and that questioning the ideal of educational partnerships is no longer acceptable? Which challenges thereby result, including for carrying out empirical analysis from the perspective of educators and the children themselves (see Chapter 6)?

38 See the explanations in Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a): “In the research on school development [...] less, however, is known about how widespread different forms of participation are, how the various offerings are implemented practically in schools and the extent to which they actually reach parents” (ibid.: 8).

39 At the same time, interesting empirical insights have been gained into the forms, conditions and results of partnerships at ECEC facilities and primary schools, based on different theoretical perspectives (for socio-psychological approaches see Kalicki 2010).

5. Standards for *good* partnerships and unexamined difficulties

The following is based on the national standards for Family-School Partnerships developed by the Parent Teacher Association in the United States (PTA 2014), standards that have now been empirically validated. They are presented here for guidance and to illustrate in a problem-oriented manner the difficulties associated with achieving *good* partnerships as discussed in the educational and academic debate. The standards comprise various dimensions of collaboration meant to be seen as educational partnerships; they are also present in the German debate (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013). They also overlap significantly with other well-known classifications and dimensions of successful partnerships (cf. e.g. Emerson et al. 2012; Epstein 2011). At the same time, the standards are not limited to the school level, but can also be applied to the ECEC level.⁴⁰ The following analysis is roughly grouped into five areas, although the various arguments and critical objections necessarily overlap in part, since the standards cannot be rendered entirely discrete from an analytical point of view.

In order to create cooperative support that promotes children's learning and development, it is considered important first and foremost to view parents and professionals as equal partners with different roles who work together to ensure children's success in general and the wellbeing of each child in particular in educational institutions and at home (Section 5.1). Second, the standards envision a sharing of power between the institution and the family, i.e. parents should be included as appropriate in all institutional issues and decisions relating to their child's education and thus be seen as equal partners (Section 5.2). Third, parents should become advocates for every child, i.e. parents are to be empowered and supported in demanding optimal learning conditions and equal treatment for their child and for all children (Section 5.3). Fourth, a culture of welcome and assembly should be established in educational institutions (Section 5.4) along with, fifth, close, effective communication. An exchange of views on the situation and expectations in the family and school/ECEC center is also to be promoted (Section 5.5).⁴¹ The following examines these five core standards of *good* partnerships in greater detail and amplifies them through a problem-oriented analysis.

40 The "principles of quality" for cooperating with parents on the ECEC level that are advanced by Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel (2014) differ yet again from the PTA standards, since they are based on the guidelines of the Sure Start program in the UK (ibid.: 5). However, there is overlap, for example in the expectation that parents should be seen as experts and dialogue partners and that all parents should be supported and given a greater role to play (ibid.: 3f.).

41 Successful collaboration between parents and professionals also requires collaboration with the community and/or region. This implies parent representatives and professionals in particular are expected to work together with institutions present in the social environment (see Chapter 2).



5.1 Cooperating to ensure children's success – Partnership among equals

Like most of the literature on educational partnerships, the standards envision that all parents, including less privileged parents,⁴² are to be seen as equal partners, i.e. as having the same standing as educators. Moreover, differences in the status between parents and professionals are to be prevented if at all possible. This is the hallmark of good partnership, which is to be realized using a range of measures, e.g. training courses, during which educators should avoid the use of specialized terminology and explicit references to academic theories when speaking with parents,⁴³ and easily accessible initiatives and activities that reflect parents' resources.

The difficulty is that attempts of this sort to do away with differences in status do not reflect the complexity of social relationships. Differences in status do not arise only when partners communicate about education or efforts to help children, but tend to be reproduced in those situations instead. Differences in status are, in fact, part of the power relationships found within society, relationships that all participants are beholden to and that both parents and educators are aware of, at least in part. In particular, these relationships implicitly and habitually structure parents' and professionals' beliefs and (professional) actions.⁴⁴ As long as there is no deeper, ongoing analysis of the beliefs held by parents and professionals, it can be plausibly assumed that these superficial recommendations and tips on partnership-based collaboration will prove ineffective and the reduction in educational inequalities meant to be achieved by greater cooperation will not soon materialize (see Chapter 4).

Moreover, the differences between parents and professionals will only grow as a result of the current focus on increasing expertise through ongoing professional training and on ensuring that professional work reflect quality standards – especially at ECEC, but also in primary schools. The professionalism debate focuses on what is seen as the clearly discernible difference between the competent specialists on the one side, and the educational amateurs on the other. This difference is an expression of a hierarchical relationship, another reason why the notion of a “partnership among equals” hardly seems feasible.⁴⁵

This hierarchy, furthermore, cannot be overcome by arguments that professionals are not (or should not be) concerned with parents' shortcomings, but with their resources. The hierarchy continues to exist even when (as that has been empirically shown)⁴⁶ teachers and educational

42 In the German literature they are often described (somewhat demeaningly) as “bildungsfern” (educationally deprived), a designation that clearly contradicts the notion of partnership (see e.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2012: 1).

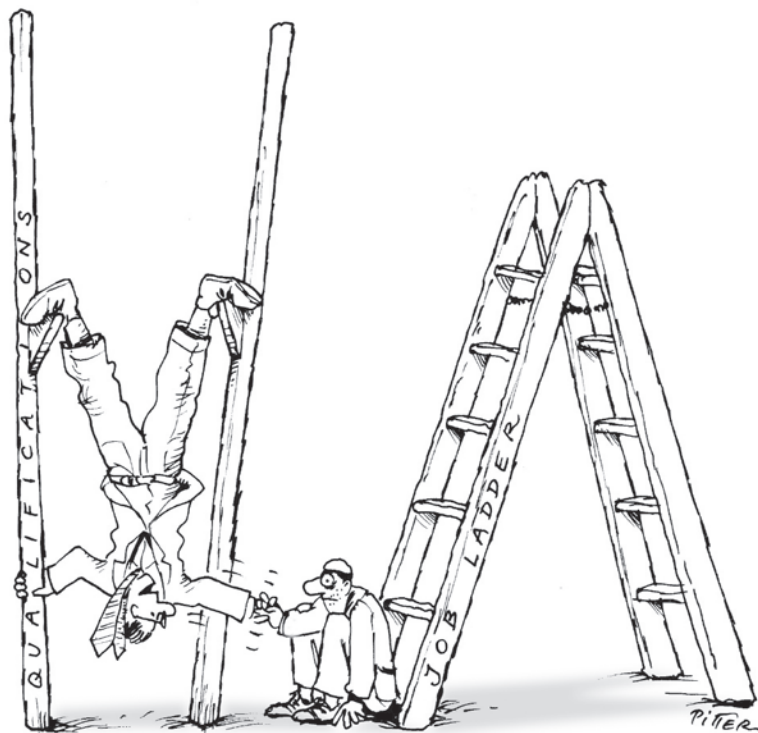
43 Montandon (1993), cited in Schwaiger/Neumann (2011: 61f.).

44 See e.g. Lenger/Schneickert & Schumacher (2013) for more on habitus theory.

45 See Cloos/Karner (2010a: 179) for more on the profession theory basis for this difference.

46 The argument presented here is based in particular on findings from and interpretations of group discussions with teachers and educational practitioners at ECEC facilities included in a major study by Viernickel et al. (2013: 137). The interviewees said they used a role-playing exercise to demonstrate to parents how frustrating it is for children when they are helped too quickly, framing it as follows: “Parents thus prevent children from experiencing their own competencies, not because the parents are angry, but because they are unaware of what they are doing, because they do not know how important it is for children to experience their own competencies. [...] As far as the parents are concerned, their intentions are good” (ibid.). Similar findings can also be found in studies of schools that repeatedly reference parents' lack of knowledge.

practitioners are successful in acknowledging the parental perspective during their daily work and recognizing that parents only want the best for their children and are merely lacking in knowledge (including about the educational system, children's development, etc.). And although this makes the educators' professional focus clear, it also attests to the lack of an equal partnership, since, despite the purported focus on resources, the assumption is that parents do not have the relevant knowledge while the professionals do. One hallmark of the educational discourse is an acceptance of "the ignorance of parents," as documented in the relevant literature;⁴⁷ this also seems to be a common attitude in the field. More to the point, it is a widespread, key issue in the current educational, social and integration policy debate.⁴⁸



Parents and educators as equal partners

47 E.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2012). In an assessment of how home-school partnerships are viewed, the text states that programs for working with parents can be helpful to "overcome the lack of school and *parental resources* for optimally assisting children" (ibid.: 3, italics added).

48 As illustrated by the EDUCARE study (e.g. Betz/de Moll & Bischoff 2013; Bischoff/Betz 2015).



In addition, the term “partnership” is clearly fulfilling its ideological function (Stange 2012) and obscuring the fact that it is not possible for parents and professionals to come together as equals. With that, existing power structures are justified or ignored and the asymmetries between families and pedagogical institutions are “programmatically papered over” (Andresen 2014: 172). This is particularly true given that the professionals are largely native-born and the parents – who, as discussed, are often pointedly used as examples in the debate – are frequently non-natives. In particular, they are portrayed as unknowing, i.e. lacking knowledge of the “German standards” existent at ECEC facilities and in schools and families and of the “right” way to rear and further assist their children (e.g. Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2014b: 7 and 2012: 1).

In this context, the literature repeatedly notes that, as part of good partnerships, parents, especially non-native parents, should be introduced to opportunities for increasing and ensuring their child’s chances for success in the educational system. Such recommendations are highly normative in nature and have immediate implications for both parents and professionals.

In terms of parents and families, they imply that these parents should adopt an authoritative style of child-rearing (love and discipline). They should thus create a well-structured, orderly domestic (learning) environment and an “educationally friendly atmosphere” (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2012: 4) for their children and should do their best to organize and monitor their children’s after-school activities. Another key factor is ensuring intellectual stimulation at home, albeit without exerting pressure (see e.g. Sacher 2014a: 166). Time spent by children outside of the family and educational institutions that is not monitored and/or controlled (by adults) is especially taken as a sign that the child is at risk, regardless of the child’s age.⁴⁹

At first glance, these expectations of how parents should behave could appear to be a dialogue among equals that addresses (in-home) measures for aiding children; they could also be seen as being in the best interests of the parents, who also want to improve their child’s performance. This, at least, is the most common interpretation. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the talk of a partnership among equals is used a rhetoric device (see Nawrotzki 2012; Vincent/Tomlinson 1997), one that functions on a number of levels. First, the term has so many positive associations that it is in essence no longer possible for teachers and educational practitioners to distance themselves from the ideal of a partnership-based relationship, something that also applies to administrators and those above them in the educational hierarchy. It is no longer legitimate to *not* endorse collaboration, e.g. in an institution’s mission statement. In terms of professional work, is more or less no longer possible to see cooperative partnerships as having

⁴⁹ The children’s safety, (educational) progress and wellbeing are all thus seen as endangered. On the other hand, these children are also seen as being a danger to others and as a threat to the social order, since society is also interested in having well-integrated, “functioning” and “normal” adults as its members; see the findings from an empirical analysis of the national policy debate in Germany: Betz (2013a); Betz/Bischoff (2013); see also Edwards (2002).

little value and to actively assert this within the team or among colleagues. Second, the term semantically upgrades the role of parents to partners of equal standing in educating, rearing and assisting children, thereby making it difficult for parents to legitimately refuse to cooperate. While the literature emphasizes that, in keeping with this new notion of cooperation, parents are *permitted* and *able* to become partners to professionals⁵⁰ – since the key role they play in children’s education and development is (now)⁵¹ being considered, as is their expertise – what is mostly ignored is that they *must be* partners as well (see for details Section 5.5).

With that, the following can be seen as problematic: The debate on and calls for good cooperation with strong, equal, family partners ignores the fact that family life is now to be regulated in keeping with the general desire for children to succeed. Thanks to training, talks and entreaties, parents are supposed to become “better” parents who are (or should be) primarily interested in seeing their children become successful adults – with good educational qualifications, respectable occupations and, thus, privileged status. The “types of involvement” by parents enumerated by Joyce Epstein – and the efforts inspired by her – include clear descriptions of how “good” parents should act. This becomes clear in the “learning at home” type, which is meant to get parents involved in curriculum-oriented activities such as summer learning modules and helping children with their homework (see e.g. Emerson et al. 2012: 27f.). Ignoring for the moment that the findings on the impact that helping children with their homework has are very controversial, this idea promulgates a standardized attitude towards parenting that devalues alternative notions of childhood, child-rearing, parenthood, and even adulthood.⁵²

A hallmark of the political and educational debate on achieving a partnership among equals is the pronounced tendency to coningle pedagogical ambitions with ideas of what parents and families should be like and, with that, notions of how children should be raised, educated and supported; this includes implicit assumptions of who is responsible for what. All in all, it is a conflation that teachers and educational practitioners can hardly undo in their professional work. Demands that collaboration should take place without stigmatizing, labeling or undervaluing certain groups (see Sacher 2014a) are thus replete with prior assumptions. A number of promising approaches exist especially in the area of ECEC, some of which have already been evaluated, which offer culturally sensitive ways of cooperating with parents, e.g. anti-bias education and child-rearing (see Gomolla 2010; Wagner 2013). Yet in contrast to the standards for successful partnership developed by the PTA that are discussed here, these and other systemically designed approaches envision that not only are the actors to be changed, so are, crucially, institutional structures and key cross-points in the intersections of educational institutions and in the system for educating, rearing and supporting children – especially if educational inequalities are to be minimized (see Chapter 7).

50 The rights of parents within partnerships with educational institutions are not being questioned here. Partnership as an unquestioned norm is meant to be problematized instead.

51 Stange (2012) notes a difference between earlier approaches to working with parents and current approaches to educational and child-rearing partnerships, ascertaining: “Parents and educational practitioners [...] have an equal relationship that no longer resembles the classically asymmetrical pattern found between parents and professionals” (ibid.: 15).

52 Compare as well the critical observations found in Kalicki (2010).



5.2 Power-sharing – Appropriate inclusion in all issues and decisions

In the ideal educational partnership and the sharing of power it involves, parents and educators are supposed to act together as equals addressing all institutional concerns. This is true in terms of professional work, including classroom instruction and applied programs (e.g. language learning); it also pertains to institutional spaces, e.g. collaborative efforts to design and maintain outdoor areas, entryways and other rooms in ECEC centers and schools.

Despite the general calls to include parents and share power as a sign of good partnership, it is often forgotten that parents and professionals – regardless of at ECEC facilities or primary schools – have a different relationship with children. They take on different roles, pursue different interests and have different emotional ties, depending on whether the child in question is their own or one who has been entrusted to their care. In addition, situations requiring communication arise, e.g. when decisions must be made, that bring together educational experts, on the one hand, and non-professionals, on the other (see Schwaiger/Neumann 2011), that is, they bring together members of a profession and institution who are responsible for structuring their professional activities with private individuals.

The relevant literature asserts that developing joint educational goals is an expression of *good* partnership, as is having educational partners share goals and the methods for achieving those goals. This concord might indeed be relevant on the level of the individual institution, but the underlying premise is not in keeping with the institutions' public mandate and the institutional goals prescribed by law – including how they relate to parental inclusion and participation.⁵³ The ideological function of the term “partnership” obscures the relative lack of legal standing that parents have when it comes to institutional issues.⁵⁴

Among other sources, empirical findings show that a true sharing of power is not possible and is hardly desired by teachers and educational practitioners as they carry out their professional duties. The findings demonstrate that participation by and support from parents is welcomed more on the perimeter of professional work and not in core areas (classroom instruction, daily educational tasks, development of new approaches, etc.).⁵⁵

It is therefore necessary to ask, in view of the relevant institutional conditions, which professional competencies teachers and educational practitioners need to allow (greater) cooperation and par-

⁵³ Compare as well the criticism expressed by Ulshöfer (2014) of the concept of co-construction as it appears in the state of Hesse's educational plan for ECEC centers and primary schools.

⁵⁴ Taking this observation and assessment as a point of departure, it would be interesting to examine on the political level – systematically and, where appropriate, in an internationally comparative manner – the legally prescribed obligations and collectively anchored rights of parents at ECEC facilities and primary schools. This could include an assessment of whether differences in the legal framework governing relationships between parents and educational institutions systematically lead to different forms and impacts of cooperation.

⁵⁵ See findings in Betz/Gaiser & Pluto (2010); Viernickel et al. (2013: 131ff.); Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 22).

ticipation to begin with – a subject that has not yet been sufficiently researched. This would require focusing on the professionals themselves, including the way they perceive their own roles and their assumptions about which areas the family and the educational institution are responsible for, and their beliefs about education, child-rearing and how best to assist children. Such an undertaking should ideally examine two elements of this multifaceted debate more closely:

As has been shown, the widespread call, advanced on a discursive level, for a greater sharing of power between home and school is currently opposed by developments that aim to transfer to ECEC centers the professional disparity between parents and educators that has long been established in schools. The debate on increasing professionalism is reinforcing these developments⁵⁶ (see Chapter 5.1) and the question remains of how the professionals themselves feel about it. In addition, the notion of power-sharing and, with it, the lack of differentiation between adults – i.e. between parents and educators – can be seen as a decrease in professionalism (de-professionalization), even if defenders of the partnership ideal do not intend it as such. After all, if there were a true sharing of power, specialized educational competencies, which distinguish experts from non-professionals (and should do so), would no longer be required.⁵⁷ The converse is meanwhile also conceivable: that non-professionals would become, or be made into, experts who strive for greater knowledge and who (must) repeatedly demonstrate their abilities in, for example, parent-education programs.⁵⁸

At the same time, there have long been developments both on the ECEC and primary-school levels whose goal is to involve volunteers, such as parent advisors, parent mentors and educational guides, who in some cases have already been active for quite some time, even if there is a clear countermovement and demands from within the educational policy-making sphere opposing non-professional involvement (cf. vbw 2012). When it comes to including non-professionals, it is perhaps even possible to speak of greater collaboration among partners of equal standing.

Yet it must be noted that these helpers, too, can and should only complement and support each institution's core activities. A discussion is taking place in schools about including parents in school activities as part of differentiated instruction – when specific subjects are being taught, for example, or if the subject is one that reflects parental expertise. These sporadic participatory efforts do not, however, represent a sharing of power as laid out in the standards. In addition, it would be necessary to take a critical look at which parents get involved (or are able to) and in which ways. This means that unintentional effects would have to be considered to a greater extent than in the past, for example, if only mothers and fathers who are well off are present within the institution, contributing their (professional) expertise. Until now, researching this issue has not been an essential part of the debate, nor has considering the secondary effects of power-sharing.

⁵⁶ For insight into this debate, see e.g. Anders (2012); Betz (2013b); Hoffmann (2013).

⁵⁷ See findings from the case study by Ulshöfer (2014) examining the educational plan of the state of Hesse.

⁵⁸ For more on approaches to being a “good” parent as a topic in the German policy debate, see Betz/de Moll & Bischoff (2013: 76 ff.).



As was argued in Section 5.1, the relative terms and, with them, the semantic level would have to be examined along with the underlying professional work to discover the extent to which they regulate, guide and direct families and family life, i.e. parents and children, or the degree to which they are intended to do so. A critical analysis is needed of which “good” practices and programs are designed to become involved in family life and decision-making, rather than systematically including parents in institutional concerns.⁵⁹ After all, agreements between parents and educators (at ECEC facilities and schools) are part of a larger construct of what “good parenting” means or should mean today, something that is also true of communication and partnerships as they are both proclaimed and lived. It must be noted here that parents, and mothers in particular, are quickly seen as the ones responsible for their children’s social behavior and for their success or failure in school or other educational institutions, a fact that is usually ignored in the German debate on partnerships.⁶⁰

In addition, calls can be heard within the discussion of greater cooperation among equals for professionals to take an increased interest in families and their needs and problems, including those relating to their heritage, housing situation, work, health, etc. However, it must be remembered that the knowledge that teachers and educators are expected to acquire when taking such an interest can in this context – as in any pedagogic or political context – also be used against those to whom it applies (see Emmerich/Hormel 2013). For example, it is conceivable that teachers or educational practitioners will ascribe a family’s being hard to reach to factors relating to the parents. That means the precarious living situation, the non-native heritage, the “lack of interest” in school-related or institutional concerns and the general lack of engagement in educational matters, from the professional’s point of view, are all seen as the underlying cause, allowing responsibility for the various problems to be more or less clearly assigned.

These assumptions and prejudices can also increase with every aspect of the parental resources, attitudes and difficulties that the professionals become acquainted with. To ensure this does not happen, professionals must have a high level of competence in terms of their ability to reflect on the situation and the “pitfalls”.

Beyond that, it must also be considered that the growing acceptance of the “partnership rhetoric” and of the political and professional assumption that collaboration is beneficial is increasingly regulating and directing not only parents and family life, but to an equal extent teachers’ and educational practitioners’ professional practices (see Vincent/Tomlinson 1997). Moreover, professionals are less able to avoid subscribing to this “outstanding professional practice.” Qualitative and quantitative studies are therefore needed to explore the strategies for responding in practical terms to calls for “More cooperation!” and “Cooperation as partnership!” It would also be impor-

59 See Epstein’s “types of involvement”; see Emerson et al. (2012: 27f.). Kalicki (2010) calls, for example, for a problematization of whether educational practitioners at ECEC centers have or should have the mandate of talking about topics such as the relationship between a child’s parents (ibid.: 199).

60 See Vincent/Tomlinson (1997); see as well the findings in Viernickel et al. (2013).

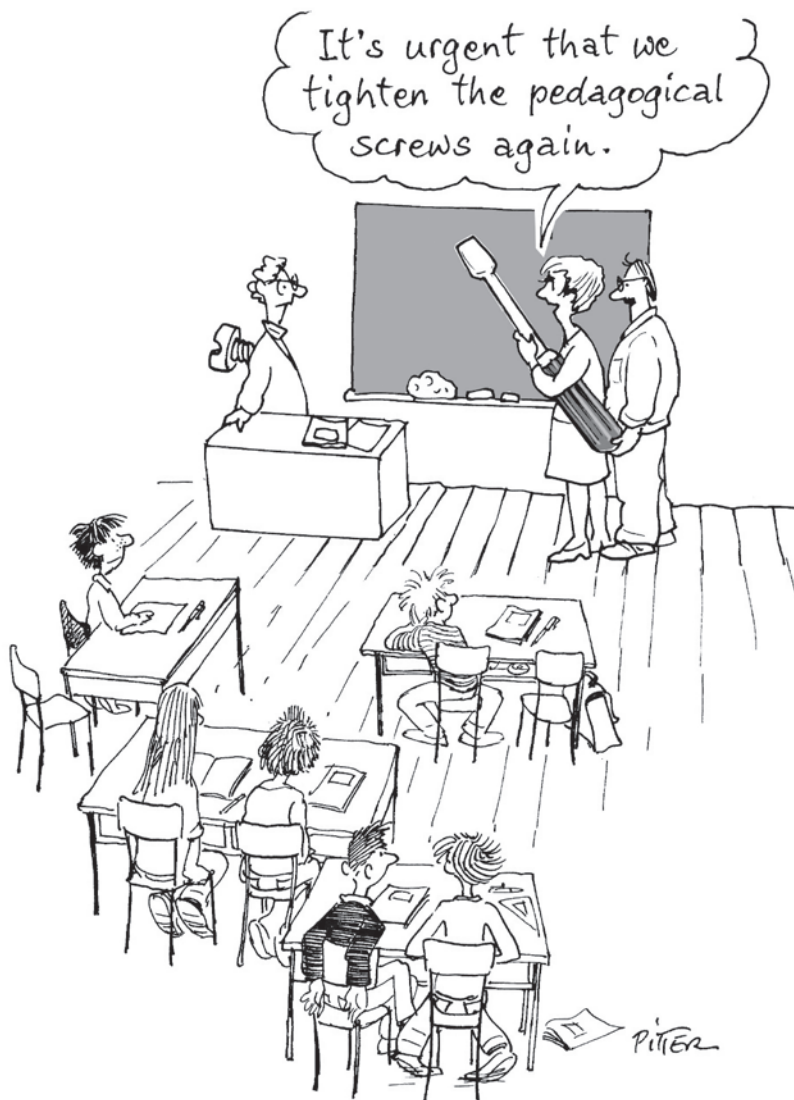
tant to learn which approach to power-sharing is taken by professionals, on the one hand, and mothers and fathers, on the other, and how the various parties view cooperation. For example, should cooperation be a response to problems and thereby take place on an as-needed basis, or should it be ongoing? It would be advisable to design the research and field studies in a way that would make it possible to show that for power-sharing to be truly equitable, one or both sides must legitimately have the right *not* to participate in the partnership.

5.3 Parents as advocates for every child

This standard, or characteristic, of good cooperation is meant to empower parents so they can ensure *all children* are treated fairly and have access to optimal learning opportunities. There are few research findings in Germany on this collective form of cooperation and participation that go beyond self-reporting – on, among other topics, the frequency of parents’ participation in committees and educational bodies and how satisfactory that participation has been. The debate is more clearly dominated instead by the topic of individual forms of cooperation. This is justified by the argument that success in school is determined more by participation on the part of individual parents than by collectively structured rights and/or opportunities to participate (see e.g. Sacher 2014a).

The empirical foundation for such arguments would first have to be laid. From the perspective of inequality theory, which assumes significant educational inequalities between children of different social and migration-related backgrounds, it is conceivable that a better structural anchoring of parents’ collective rights could potentially reduce the inequality between educational institutions and parents – particularly in schools. This would require working towards structural changes in both the policy-making context and in the field of educational institutions.

One approach here could be to require institutions to provide anonymized information when children move from one educational level to another. The information could include, as a percentage of all children in the institution, how many youngsters from a specific group (e.g. children of single parents) are transitioning to a primary school (or are being held back) or are advancing to a secondary school (with the results differentiated by the type of secondary school). These “report cards” could help draw parents’ attention – now and over time – to systematic inequalities, and would potentially increase parents’ motivation to get involved on their child’s behalf, or on the behalf of similar children or even all children. In view of the empirical finding that immigrants are significantly underrepresented as parent representatives (see Sacher 2014a; Schwaiger/Neumann 2011), efforts should be considered that would ensure all parent-related bodies are constituted in an equitable manner. Demands for such a step have already been made (see Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013), so that the challenge lies in developing strategies for achieving this on a broad scale. If and to what extent such strategies are effective in practical terms, and with which consequences, will only become clear once the relevant evidence has been gathered through empirical research.



5.4 Challenges of a culture of welcome and wellbeing

The standards for good partnership emphasize achieving a culture of welcome and wellbeing, one that applies both on the institutional level (an appropriately designed entrance, opportunities for parents to meet, etc.) and on the communicative and emotional level. According to this standard, all parents should feel they are a part of the school or ECEC community and are appreciated as such (see e.g. Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013).

The following discusses the challenges and “pitfalls” of establishing a culture of welcome and wellbeing⁶¹ on the communicative and emotional level. It does so by citing relevant findings from the current EMiL study, which examines how social and ethnic background influences individual learning and educational success.⁶² In a total of 28 qualitative, guided interviews, mothers and fathers of primary-school children were asked about their relationship with the school and teachers in order to reconstruct the attitudes underlying the parents’ actions.⁶³ The parents were grouped by social background and immigration status. This was based on the assumption that considerable differences in parental beliefs could exist that would provide insight into the mechanisms reproducing educational inequalities in primary schools.

According to the arguments found in the literature, creating a good relationship between professionals and parents, i.e. good communication and partnership, means ensuring that parents feel they are well received and welcomed when they arrive at a (new) institution, such as when a child enters first grade or secondary school. This is not true to the same extent for all parents and *typical* differences can be seen resulting from, among other factors, parents’ social background and immigration status – differences that have been little researched until now. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview conducted as part of the EMiL study. The interviewee is a mother who describes herself as being working class and whose child (she has four) is currently in primary school but will soon transition to a secondary school. [Illustration] The following excerpt is from an interview conducted in 2013 as part of the research project.⁶⁴ In it, the mother describes her current experiences visiting secondary schools.

Mother A [...] I think you first have to take a moment to really arrive, so I was also in schools where ah where I was the only woman wearing a headscarf it’s I don’t know if it um (.) and I really did um ((softly)) somehow feel bad, I really didn’t feel comfortable (.) and (.) and that’s why I felt no to come to this school if I don’t feel comfortable then my child certainly can’t feel comfortable here. (.) I said right from the start no he’s not going there. (.) because (.) I don’t know (.) I don’t know how I can um (.) explain it.

61 See the brief summary of relevant studies in Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 19f.).

62 The study took place from 2011 to 2014 at Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany) and was conducted under the auspices of the Department of Educational Sciences and the IDeA (Individual Development and Adaptive Education) research center (information on the research project is available at: http://www.idea-frankfurt.eu/en/research/theme/adaptive-education/emil?set_language=en (accessed November 1, 2015)).

63 The documentary method served as the methodological foundation (e.g. Bohnsack/Pfaff/Weller 2010)

64 The interviews were transcribed using a modified version of TiQ (Talk in Qualitative Social Research; see Bohnsack 2008: 235f.).



This brief passage shows that the mother felt she was an “outsider” as “the only woman wearing a headscarf” and that she had the feeling the school was not the right place for her and therefore for her son (“I really didn’t feel comfortable”). She senses that the school has a specific *culture* to which she feels she does not belong and which she rejects emotionally.

It is easy to see that there are fairly obvious factors relating to the institution (e.g. dilapidated building, poor air quality, outdated restrooms, cramped spaces) that prevent a culture of welcome and wellbeing from taking root and that even educators and administrators can do little to change, since the financial resources are often lacking. Less conspicuous, however, are the communicative and emotional processes that take place with or within parents. Little empirical evidence is available on this subject as it pertains to the debate on educational partnerships. It can be assumed, however, that different attitudes exist among different social and ethnic groups, attitudes that would have to be taken into consideration (see Sacher 2014a). It would therefore be worthwhile to examine in greater detail the habitual orientations, beliefs, mindsets and interpretations of mothers and fathers of different ethnic backgrounds (and social milieus) in order to gain insight into how and when they feel welcome and accepted, i.e. what provides them with a sense of wellbeing.

That, on the one hand, illustrates a gap in the existing research. On the other, without greater knowledge of parental beliefs, it is difficult to respond within professional work to first impressions of the type seen in the above example. These experiences can be momentous and – to use a phrase borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu – lead to self-elimination on the part of parents (see Betz 2008), i.e. to their withdrawing from more exclusive schools, for example, at which less-privileged parents or parents of non-native heritage and possibly their children do not feel welcome.

Another excerpt from an interview with a mother of four children who identifies as being working class and who is discussing her relationship to her son’s teacher illustrates how parents sometimes understand the concept of a “culture of wellbeing.” It also shows the difficulties that might arise if a partnership is based on such an understanding.

Mother B [ok great,] (.) yes. (.) we can we are talk ah can talk (well-) about everything. um: (.) in the third grade the boy the teacher likes the [son 2] very much, ((smiling)) so my son she likes him a lot, I can tell, yeah, and sometimes she tells me @things@ where I think @(.).@ is she talking about my son? I mean at home he is totally @different@ and in school he is very neat, and at home he is more messy, yeah, and so we then start exchanging stories, @and then she starts laughing really hard, and I @laugh@ really hard, yeah, because we can’t believe it (.) yeah, and ah in terms of the older one the teacher also wants what’s best for him [son 1]. so as I said (.) I’ve been (.) really lucky ((claps)) (.) I have to say (...) yeah.

[...] um that it’s very good for him so I can tell they are trying I mean about weaknesses that is really his weak point, (.) yeah, (.) they really do try and they think about things, (.) [...] I can tell that she really thought about it the same way I thought about it, (.) where we then both also had the same ((claps twice)) then right? because I also never would have gone to a top-tier secondary school, since I think that (.) well he is not yet really ready (...)

These two short passages demonstrate that this mother has – on an affective, emotional level – a good relationship to the teacher (“can talk about everything”; “she laughs really hard”) and in terms of the school her focus is on the teacher. Her goal is that a good relationship exists between her and the teacher and between the teacher and the students, i.e. between her son and the teacher. Yet this good relationship is fragile and is not her doing (“been lucky”). She emphasizes the commonalities between her and the teacher (“we”). What is key for this mother is the goodwill, the mutual sympathy and the shared “motherly” concern for the son (“she likes him a lot”). Despite – or because of? – this positive emotional relationship (“she really thought about it”), it



is already clear that potentially risky experiences of “failure” – risky because of their possibly negative nature – are being excluded at the primary level through avoidance (“I also never would have gone to a top-tier secondary school”). What can be deduced from the above example, an example that can be taken to represent a certain type of parent (see for more details on the study and the findings Kayser/Betz 2015)?

First, the communication between the mother and teacher can be said to be quite good, viewed from the mother’s perspective as analyzed here – just as the standards calling for a culture of wellbeing would have it. At the same time, it must be noted that, in terms of the desired outcomes of the collaboration – which, as noted, should include better performance on the part of the children and educational achievement – the son in this example might not be able to develop to his full potential. There is no thought of transitioning to a top-level secondary school; at least the mother – and the teacher – are not (currently) considering this option. This observation and interpretation can be understood as the “sense of constraint” advanced by Annette Lareau (2011), a term used to denote when members of less privileged social groups behave in a more reserved manner in the context of educational institutions or the healthcare system than members of privileged groups do. For example, they do not make certain demands or do not follow the advice and recommendations of teachers and educational practitioners (or, in other contexts, doctors), even if this does not lead to the desired success or the children’s wellbeing. In the current example, the mother shares the teacher’s view of the son’s weaknesses and therefore is not considering (for the moment) sending him to a top-tier secondary school (see Kayser/Betz 2015).

An entirely different attitude towards the school and teacher becomes clear in the following excerpt. Here a mother of one child is interviewed; she describes herself as belonging to the upper middle class and speaks about her relationship with the child’s teacher.

Mother C [...] so as I said I think the teacher does a good job right? I can see it you know? and I see that she [the daughter] is happy (.) and so (.) overall I’m happy. [...] so I ah I don’t have very much contact //mhm// with the teachers, so as I’ve said I keep my distance=said that back then to the teacher to the classroom teacher ((takes a breath)) she should let me know if there’s something going on right? so I don’t always go and participate in every parent-teacher conference and that kind of thing I see the grades right? ((claps)) and if it’s A B and C, (.) then I don’t go right? then everything is OK for me right? and I think what if she [the daughter] had a social problem right? then I would firstly notice it and she would tell me (.) I assume that would be the case and the teacher naturally does too. and that’s why I think it’s not necessary @(.)@

This brief passage shows that the mother's attitude is not emotional and affective, but functional and control-oriented. Her relationship to the teacher is more role-related. The excerpt suggests a form of what Annette Lareau (2011) calls a "sense of entitlement": The school and/or the teacher provide services that parents can expect (e.g. "and the teacher naturally does too"). The mother is not interested in an emotional relationship with the teacher; as a mother she is not focused on her own feelings of "wellbeing." Instead she tells the teacher to "say something" if a relevant issue comes up. The mother is observing and evaluating the school and, with that, the teacher from the more distanced role of the expert; she affirms that the teacher is doing her job professionally and makes the clear distinction in this context between when it is necessary to contact the school and when it is probably not. Contacting and communicating with the child's teacher does not seem to be "valuable" in and of itself – for example, in that a good relationship is being built or expanded upon – but as something that serves a particular purpose when there is a specific reason, e.g. in this case grades lower than a C.

These brief examples taken from more comprehensive material (see Kayser/Steiner & Betz 2013, Kayser/Betz 2014 and 2015) should be sufficient to suggest what a systematic engagement with parents' attitudes would look like – here, in terms of the culture of welcome and wellbeing that many are calling for today. More probing analyses in this direction could not only enliven the academic exploration of the topic of collaboration and educational partnerships and enrich the debate by providing a critical, more distanced perspective; they would also have implications for practice. Insights into how mothers and fathers feel would be valuable, as would recognition of the decisions and next steps that sometimes require both parents and professionals to leave their "comfort zone" (which does not happen in the example above, since agreement is quickly reached that the son will not attend a top-tier secondary school). This would have to become a standard part of the basic and ongoing training that primary-school teachers and ECEC practitioners receive in order to prevent them from prematurely using simple approaches to cooperation with all parents; above all, it would increase awareness of the "pitfall" of "good" partnerships in which all participants feel comfortable and safe thanks to a culture of "wellbeing."⁶⁵ Until now the latter, more meaningful argument has neither been seriously discussed in the educational and academic debate, nor, as the hypothesis would have it, has it been taken into account on the practical level in educational institutions as a side effect of idealizing the concept of collaboration and partnership, a side effect that should not be underestimated.

5.5 Intensive and effective communication

As a further key element of communication, the standards of good cooperation call for, among other things, an ongoing exchange between professionals and parents about situations, expectations and beliefs relating to the family and the ECEC center or school. Closer, more effective communication is seen here as necessary. Yet no empirical findings exist attesting to the need for

⁶⁵ See suggestions in Kayser/Betz (2015).



this type of communication or its efficacy in terms of achieving the goals that are supposed to be gained through educational partnerships.

Research would need to be carried out, for example, examining the attitudes of those parents often referred to as “hard to reach” who, among other things, refuse invitations to cooperate and communicate closely (e.g. Mother C in the above example). Preliminary findings show that parents who could potentially be deemed hard to reach say that for them cooperation is *not useful*. Instead, they maintain contact with the educational institution only to ensure they are not perceived as being uninterested (see Sacher 2014a). This finding demonstrates the degree to which (greater) cooperation is already seen as a fundamental, unassailable standard for the work done at ECEC centers and primary schools and how difficult it is to refuse to participate (in this case, for the parents to do so). Additional research on the viewpoints and beliefs of parents is therefore needed.



Empirical studies are also needed on communication and cooperation between all types of mothers, fathers and professionals in order to shed light on a number of questions, including: What are the benefits of collaboration? What is important to parents when they are called on to collaborate? Is their focus on their children’s success in school? And/or having a good relationship with teach-

ers and educational practitioners? Or perhaps a third factor? Which strategies do mothers and fathers develop in dealing with expectations that they should work and communicate closely with teachers and educational practitioners?

A number of interrelated causes can be discerned when it comes to the phenomenon of being “hard to reach,” which is, from the institutional perspective, a key hurdle to close, effective communication (see Walker et al. 2005 cited in Sacher 2014a: 148f.). They illustrate what must be examined in the German context and the relatively unexplored context of ECEC if differences among parents are to be taken into account and parental viewpoints better understood. The literature stresses, among other things, how important it is to explain parents’ motivation regarding (increased) contact and cooperation (see *ibid.*). One plausible assumption here is that there are different beliefs among parents depending on position, i.e. in different social strata, as to which role parents should play. At the same time, specific beliefs also exist as to what parents are responsible for, on the one hand, and the ECEC center or school, on the other. It can also be assumed that parents have specific expectations of how effective they can be, i.e. expectations of whether through their own actions they can achieve specific goals in the educational institution.

An empirical examination is also required of the issue of how parents perceive professionals when they offer to collaborate and have contact with parents: as doing so out of a sense of obligation or willingly, as a matter of conviction? As something well intentioned but poorly executed? As invasive, irrelevant or, perhaps, entirely appropriate? Some indications exist that parental engagement increases when parents ascertain that educators highly value cooperation. The degree of engagement or cooperation also depends, it can be assumed, on parents’ current circumstances and their specific biography (see Andresen 2014). This includes parents’ individual experiences, past and present, in and with educational institutions, the degree to which they have a command of the language relevant to the institutions, their own competencies (as they perceive them) and how they have experienced them, and the amount of time parents have at their disposal, e.g. because of work, problems in the family (such as health issues, lack of financial resources, etc.).

These factors have not yet been the subject of research and it is therefore not clear whether the efforts to achieve greater cooperation and the ideal of educational partnerships are a burden to parents or a help, or which interrelated reasons apply to parents who choose not to cooperate. While the literature one-sidedly calls for *more* cooperation, it is easy to see that the factor of time in particular is of key importance, both when it comes to expectations of greater communication and more power-sharing and involvement in educational issues. In other words, how are mothers and fathers who are employed full-time outside the home to meet these expectations, posed by institutional actors? How are increased communication and involvement in the full range of institutional issues possible, if parents have children attending different educational institutions? To what extent can disadvantaged single mothers in precarious living situations with unreliable childcare arrangements and irregular work schedules be expected to live up to this ideal?



In the debate on achieving more intensive and more effective communication, e.g. through the use of guided-discussion techniques with parents, it often goes unnoticed that the terminology employed usually suggests that cooperating with “parents” means dealing with a homogenous entity, something that does not do justice to the “special” role that mothers and fathers play in educating children and ensuring their success. What is also disregarded is the empirically observed finding that calls for greater cooperation are often directed at mothers alone and put them, not fathers, under greater pressure (see Vincent/Tomlinson 1997). More consideration must therefore be given to the fact that specific political and pedagogical approaches are what “make” mothers out of women and fathers out of men, who are then often expected to assert their rights and fulfill their responsibilities in stereotypical fashion.

That is why it would be appropriate for research to take a differentiated approach, one that is sensitive to these attributions in that it considers differences of gender, social background and ethnic heritage, i.e. one with an intersectional orientation. In terms of practice, it is also important to have differentiated, culturally sensitive collaboration and communication with parents, i.e. practice which refutes the idea that quality standards exist that apply to *all* parents. While the latter is generally dismissed in the relevant literature, one-size-fits-all characteristics of *good* partnerships and guidelines for them are nonetheless frequently advanced, e.g. when a paper released by the Vodafone Stiftung responds to the question “What is our goal?” with the answer “Getting schools, parents and parent representatives to maintain a *regular* exchange of information *independent of any specific issue*”⁶⁶ or when Kobelt Neuhaus/Haug-Schnabel & Bensel (2014: 4) call for a quality principle in the form of a *daily*, informal exchange between practitioners at ECEC centers and parents about the events and developmental steps experienced by the child. The example of Mother C provided above makes clear that she would not be interested in a regular or daily meeting which has no specific reason for taking place and that this form of partnership is not appropriate for this type of parent.⁶⁷

Moreover, in terms of the calls for more intensive and more effective communication, the question must be asked as to how and with whom the communication is supposed to take place on a daily basis. Here, too, little research exists. Empirical evidence on the importance of gender in partnerships shows, for example, that boys benefit more when the father gets involved than when the mother does (see Jeynes 2011) and that fathers who do not have custody of the child have generally not been included in partnerships.

Some publications conclude in this context that the role of fathers in partnerships needs to be bolstered. This is to be achieved, for example, by approaching fathers directly and through special events held in the evening and on weekends in particular, as a way of interesting fathers in

66 Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland (2013: 7; italics added); similarly, see Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Bayerischen Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst (2014).

67 The quality principles are meant to apply either to schools or to ECEC facilities, i.e. to different age groups. Yet only a few weeks separate the last year of preschool from the first year of primary education, which means this argument continues to be relevant.

collaborating and motivating them to do so. At different points, the literature notes that “getting fathers involved” should focus on home-based activities in order not to interfere with fathers’ working lives (i.e. they are employed full time). Moreover, in order to help fathers take on a more active role, fathers should, the authors argue, be asked to get involved in “technical and crafts-related activities” (see Sacher 2014a: 139) and in “informal men’s groups” in the areas of soccer, computers and music.

While these ideas and recommendations are a departure from the notion that all parents are the same and while they are directed specifically at (“hard-to-reach”) fathers, they clearly entail clichés and gender stereotypes that are not sufficiently considered (or would not be) for the desired cooperation. It would be necessary to examine if it is primarily a case of stereotypes having been introduced into the studies and publications by the researchers, or if professionals at ECEC facilities and primary schools themselves make use of gender-related clichés (and if so, which ones) during their professional work, especially at the intersection of home and school, home and ECEC. The latter could in turn be used as a point of departure for professional training, both initial and ongoing, that adequately considers this issue.



6. Teachers, practitioners, parents – and the children?

A key aspect of the discussion about improved, increased cooperation with families, an aspect that has not been considered up until now, is the role that the children themselves have, or should be given, within the partnerships. One striking observation that can be made after an examination of the current research and the mostly practice-oriented literature on educational partnerships between professionals and parents especially in Germany is that, as venues for socialization, the family, on the one hand, and ECEC centers and schools, on the other, are given a much greater weight than the children themselves. The argument is made everywhere that the partnerships are designed to promote the wellbeing of the children, i.e. are “in children’s best educational interests” (Edwards 2002: 3) – a wellbeing in which the children are not immediately involved, neither in its definition nor in the efforts meant to achieve it.



At the same time, it is not the case that the children are wholly absent from the debates, the academic papers and the practice recommendations. In the majority of cases, however, they are clearly instrumentalized there. This can be seen in the often emphasized message that, unless other measures are taken, “educationally privileged” parents are the ones who will primarily be reached and that one possibility for counteracting this is “focusing on the child” during professional activities (see Sacher 2014a: 173f.). It is also noted that working with parents in a way that “solely” addresses the adults could fail due to the children’s lack of acceptance, and that, among other measures, older siblings should be included in the partnership (see *ibid.*), in particular in Turkish families (a suggestion that in turn reveals underlying cultural stereotypes).

In addition to the semantics of creating and deepening partnerships for “the wellbeing of the child” that are widely found in the literature, the above assertions and calls for action reveal that children are not being considered in their role as children *per se* – as “persons in their own right” in the language of childhood theory – within the partnerships, but that their temporary or sporadic integration serves other goals and that they are being used as a “means to an end.” To sum up the current literature, children are thought of more as the object of collaboration than its subject.

As for children’s wellbeing, it can be seen that the control over their time and over their activities – in school, the ECEC center and the family – grows as cooperation increases. This phenomenon is known as “concerted control” (Ericsson/Larsen 2002: 95) and must be seen in terms of the logic of partnerships in which children in particular are viewed as “educational outcomes” (Edwards 2002: 3; see Chapter 3), i.e. successful, well-developing children are the desired result – the goal – of cooperation, something that both the academic literature and practice-oriented guidebooks make clear. It is possible that this is also the predominant idea among adults active in the fields of ECEC and primary education; research, however, is lacking on this point. Yet it may be assumed that this prevailing view of children has observable consequences. At the same time, it is part of the overall developments that are leading to an increasing standardization of childhood (Kelle/Mierendorff 2013; Betz/Bischoff 2013).

It would therefore be informative to place within the cooperation debate and the resulting research a greater focus on the children, who should be considered as independent social actors. It would thus be essential to identify the children by age and other characteristics such as gender, social group, immigration status, etc., and to ascertain how partnerships can be conceptualized and shaped from their perspective(s). Until now, it has only been possible to speculate and advance initial hypotheses on this point.

It can be argued that the lack of partnership or a nonfunctioning partnership might have inherent risks for children. For example, children are exposed to greater potential for conflict the more the microsystems of “family” and “school” or “ECEC center” diverge (Schwaiger/Neumann 2011: 81). It is also possible that partnerships provide children with more influence, i.e. they can use adults



as resources to change problematic aspects of their institution-related life on the one hand and their familial life on the other (Ericsson/Larsen 2002: 95). Finally, it is conceivable that children's immediate wellbeing increases when they see that both their parents and their educators are working on their behalf and coming to agreement "for their wellbeing." Children become proud of their parents and gain trust in the institution.⁶⁸

At the same time, hypotheses on the disadvantages for children resulting from cooperation must also be taken into account. This leads to the questions of whether children at ECEC centers or schools like and support parental involvement or if they try to thwart it. Research shows, for example, that children do not discuss bad grades at home, do not communicate invitations meant for parents and "lose" registration slips for expensive class trips. Instead of being seen as impudence and circumvention, this can also be interpreted as self-protection, e.g. what happens if children grow up in poverty and know or assume that their parents would not participate in an event anyway (e.g. due to shame) or would not have the money for a class trip, or if the parents would have to explain in an awkward situation such as a parent-teacher meeting why their child is not participating or requires financial assistance.

It would therefore be necessary to take a different view of children within collaborative efforts and educational partnerships, namely a systematically more expansive one. As is true of adults (see Chapter 5), this new perspective would take into account that children, too, largely cannot escape the ideal, no longer questioned, of home-school collaboration, even though expanding collaboration could have negative consequences for children. For example, greater collaboration reduces children's privacy. From the perspective of the children, greater communication and better cooperation would only be desirable to a limited extent, since it makes their lives as students and children more transparent. They would lose the favorable position that they often have, since they are the only ones who experience otherwise exclusive situations and have bilateral communication with teachers and ECEC staff, on the one hand, and their parents, on the other. It can also be assumed that what is true for adults is true for children, i.e. that they would like to keep private and professional matters separate. If one thus sees school or the ECEC center as the "children's workplace," then it is easy to understand why it might be more agreeable for children and give them more freedom if there were less exchange taking place between the two settings. Moreover, it can be assumed that, when appropriate, children would like to speak for themselves and inform the relevant parties, something that is no longer possible when parents and educators communicate with each other (including when the child in question is not present).

The examples provided are plausible postulations that can also be applied to the wider debate on creating and expanding networks for prevention and education, as well as educational communities, and educational partnerships with additional partners (see Chapter 2). At the same time,

⁶⁸ Findings from a survey of school administrators and educators on the positive impact of parental participation in schools point in this direction (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 21).

these thought-provoking ideas make clear that empirical research is still lacking on the child's perspective and children's perspectives. Especially when it comes to including younger children, carrying out such research would be a methodological challenge, and not only because research of this sort has never previously been conducted. At the same time, these hypotheses can be understood as awareness-raising concepts that can inform the exchange among professionals on the practical challenges of cooperation and contribute to the relevant training programs for teachers and educational practitioners.



7. Conclusion and outlook

Collaboration between teachers, educational practitioners and parents is an important and challenging aspect of the professional activities taking place at ECEC centers and primary schools. At the same time, shaping how children grow both at home and in public institutions requires coordination and integration of the various contexts children experience in their daily lives – especially in light of the goal of reducing educational inequalities.

The above analysis has taken a closer look at the related educational debate and problematized the calls within that debate for *increased cooperation* between ECEC centers, primary schools and families. This was done against the background of, in particular, the *ideal of educational partnerships* and standards for *good cooperation*. The study examined how cooperation is “talked about” in order to identify implicit norms and imbalances in the debate and to call attention to the secondary effects of the prevailing discourse. Potential approaches were then derived that could be used for a deeper empirical exploration of the concept of cooperation, since even though the need for establishing and expanding educational partnerships is generally no longer questioned, basic issues have yet to be (empirically) addressed and the debate’s side effects remain largely unexamined.

Finally, brief, select findings from the analysis were summarized in an integrated, problem-oriented manner and further possibilities were suggested for empirically reinforcing the discussion.

The corresponding educational debate is very much practice-oriented with a programmatic orientation. A critical, distanced observation of the topoi “cooperation” and “educational partnerships” is almost entirely lacking. The discourse is characterized by a high level of homogeneity in terms of terminology and by a blurring of the forms, assumptions and goals of cooperation. Empirical findings from very different contexts are used to support the arguments calling for “More cooperation!” and “Good cooperation!” Yet considering, among other factors, the broad range of goals, the empirical foundation “per se” is, upon closer inspection, not robust, not to mention exceedingly thin as well as intermittent and fragmentary. No or very few empirical statements can be made about the majority of ECEC centers and primary schools in Germany, as well as their multifaceted practices and specific conditions – neither in terms of the concrete way cooperation has been realized (as educational partnerships) nor the relevant beliefs held by teachers, educational practitioners and administrators, nor the impacts and side effects of introducing and expanding the various forms of collaboration.

It therefore seems necessary to first take an empirical look at cooperation within the context of the institutions’ everyday activities. That means examining the *ongoing work with children and, where applicable, parents*. It also means looking at *how teachers and educational practitioners with their different qualifications view their own roles* and at their attitudes towards parents (mothers and fathers), children and other “partners.” Only by researching this *microlevel* will it be possi-

ble to gain insight into how partnerships are realized and the difficulties associated with them, and into what can be described – in retrospect, and depending on the perspective – as a “good” relationship or “good” partnership. This would make it possible to identify the related challenges, “pitfalls” and experiences, especially from the *perspective of the educational institutions*, but also from that of the individual actors (see below).⁶⁹ This can also be understood as an attempt to better understand the complicated mechanisms that produce and reproduce educational inequalities *in* educational institutions and at the *intersections* with families.

What is also striking is the generally high level of approval of the *rarely questioned ideal of “educational partnerships”* and of collaboration with parents as equal partners, as well as power-sharing between families and educational institutions. What this ignores, however, is that greater cooperation or cooperative partnerships standardize how both teachers and educational practitioners, on the one hand, and mothers and fathers, on the other, think and act. In addition, anyone loses legitimacy who does not support, or who does not want to support, the calls for partnership and *this unquestioned norm*, as well as the ensuing developments. Yet what becomes obscured by this semantic trick and the one-sided endorsement of efforts meant to achieve greater collaboration is the fact that standards for *good* partnership also bring with them various as-yet unstudied *side effects* and that asymmetries and hierarchies can be found in the relationships between parents and professionals, families and educational institutions. The latter become apparent in the discourse when families, especially those of non-native heritage, are referred to as being “particularly hard to reach” and, above all, as lacking knowledge. Yet especially on the practical level, what actually takes place at ECEC centers and primary schools remains completely unknown, while “partnerships are being (rhetorically) executed,” as it were, i.e. it remains unclear how and in which *configurations* differences and hierarchies creep in, both overtly and unconsciously.

The purported “*win-win situation*” resulting from greater cooperation and educational partnerships also obscures the considerable degree to which the *institutional perspective* predominates in the debate and in the quality principles advocated within that debate. In other words, collaboration is primarily geared towards ensuring smooth processes in classrooms and ECEC facilities’ daily activities. Moreover, the debate largely focuses on the actors: the teachers and educational practitioners, their thoughts and professional actions and, with that, their responsibility for any (future) failure to achieve the desired goals. Calls can thus be heard for the topic of cooperation with parents to be made a key element of the initial and ongoing training received by primary-school teachers and ECEC practitioners.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ It would also be relevant to take a look at the various instances of intermittent collaboration found at the educational system’s intersections, i.e. during transitions to nurseries, ECEC centers and primary and secondary schools, and the intermittent collaboration that takes place during specific events, programs or training courses.

⁷⁰ A representative example on the primary level: Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 5, 27); and the ECEC level: Deutsches Jugendinstitut (2011: 78ff.).

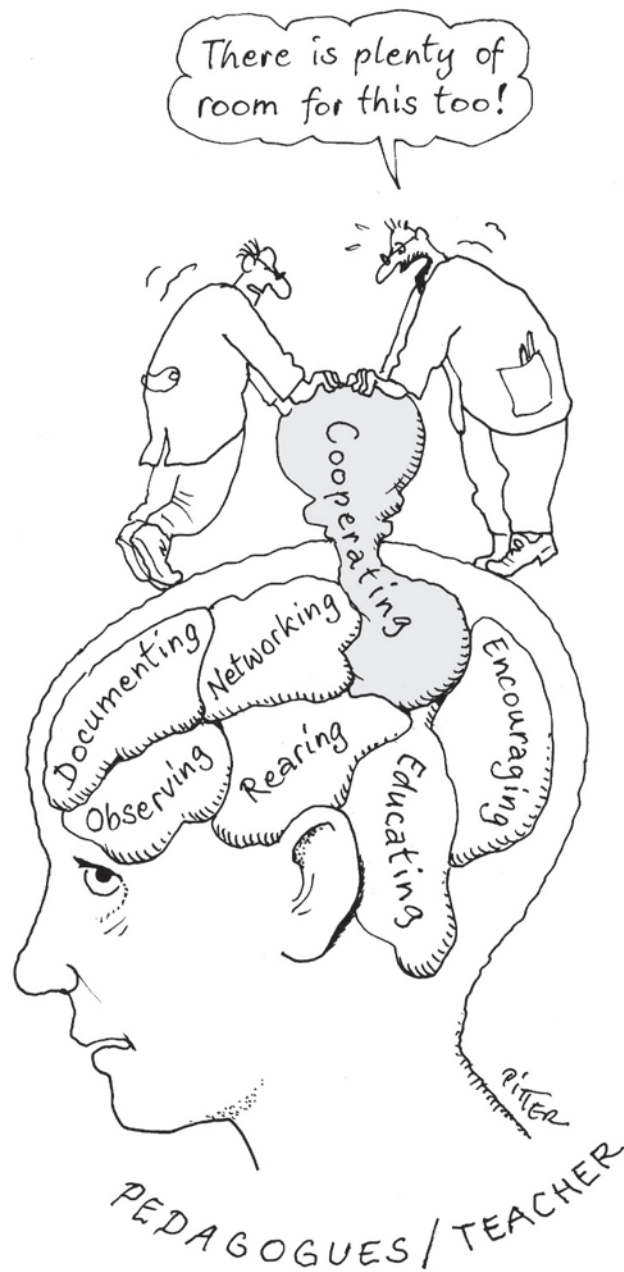


However, this does not take into account that increased cooperation and partnerships among equals can also have *negative consequences* and that this unquestioned standard can be counterproductive, especially in view of the goal of reducing educational inequalities. As shown (see Section 5.4), it might instead be more appropriate for participants to leave their comfort zone, i.e. to problematize their “all too good” cooperation, which allows them to feel safe and secure, and to become more aware of the unintended side effects such as when participants engage in self-exclusion (see Kayser/Betz 2015).

Introducing the topics of “cooperation” and “educational partnerships” into the training that teachers and educational practitioners receive would, therefore, not go far enough. A much more in-depth debate must also be conducted on what *good* cooperation actually is, as well as *whom it is good for* and in light of *which objectives*. At the same time, it would be worthwhile to conduct a systematic, critical analysis, one never before undertaken, of the curricula used in the various institutions of higher education and of educational plans and textbooks, as well as the manuals and documents used for educational training. This could shed light on *how* collaboration and partnership are generally conceived, and the relationship between parents and educators could be examined as it is described and treated in the relevant materials. Any recommendations or (binding) guidelines for collaborating with parents that are to be used in training programs for teachers and educational practitioners or as a basis for the work they do would have to be critically examined in detail.

Moreover, the pressure professionals find themselves subject to is increasing as a result of the emphasis on the institutional perspective and the resulting focus on teachers and educational practitioners and the qualification they require, including for collaborating in partnerships. That means responsibility is being shifted primarily to administrators of schools and ECEC centers and, as a result, teachers and educational practitioners.⁷¹ Yet it is rarely the case that the background conditions (and changes to them) or the educational system are addressed in such a thorough manner. The debate on collaboration as it is currently taking place thus occasionally diverts attention from structural problems – the underfunding of educational institutions, for example, the difficulties inherently found at the intersections in the educational system, and the division of responsibilities that largely reflects traditional policy-making areas. This means that cooperation requires a significant commitment of time and financial resources. After all, home visits and projects for educating parents take time and require extensive preparation on the part of professionals, something that is also true of regular, detailed communications with parents, e.g. about the child’s development.

⁷¹ See the findings and recommendations in Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (2014a: 22ff.); Viernickel et al. (2013: 133ff.).



It would thus be necessary to examine, also empirically, the resources and conditions educational professionals need to do their jobs. More empirical investigations would also be worthwhile of structures that promote and hinder collaboration and of forms of organizational development at ECEC centers and primary schools. These are required, among other reasons, to identify the times when educators “need to be” available and, in general, the funding, staff and space required for collaboration and for establishing or expanding a culture of welcome and wellbeing.



At the same time, the cooperation-related literature contains policy-making recommendations that look beyond the actors to the relevant structures. The recommendations propose, for example, more funding for “good” offerings by institutions, conceptual support for individual institutions and a systematic introduction of partnerships into the curricula used in the initial and ongoing training that educators receive. As shown, simply including the topic of cooperation in curricula and overall plans does not go far enough. More critical, however, is the general lack of attention given to the fact that strengthening institutions reinforces the standardization of families and parents discussed above. To put it more strongly, one could say that greater support for the institutional side, e.g. through an increase in funding, could also increase the influence exerted on families and their private lives. After all, because of the widespread idealization of partnerships and the unquestioned institutional perspective, it is often forgotten that even in light of the institutional framework governing pedagogic activities, the undeniable standardization of the role that mothers and, to some extent, fathers are expected to play has not yet been overcome; neither has the regulation of family life, above all in regard to non-native populations. A clear focus on “hard to reach” target groups, usually immigrants, is surreptitiously emerging within the discourse instead. No critical look is being taken at the roles therefore attributed to mothers and fathers. Similarly, the impositions resulting from institutional requirements and from politically related measures (as can be seen, for example, in government education plans) are not being questioned, especially those that apply to non-native populations and certain types of families. What comes to mind is, for example, the limited amount of time available for educational partnerships when both parents work full time or when a single parent is experiencing financial or other hardship.

In order to take these phenomena into account, empirical research would be needed on the perspectives of *fathers and mothers*, as well as their attitudes towards teachers and educational practitioners and towards educational institutions. At the same time, their attitudes towards their own roles would have to be examined against the background of the family’s situation, e.g. limited time and financial resources, as would their beliefs about child-rearing, education and other measures to support children within the family. This would allow information to be gleaned on the microlevel about what mothers and fathers believe a good relationship and good partnership are – and, even more broadly, a *good* childhood and *good* family – since educational efforts within the family can be understood in more ways than just as they pertain to educational institutions (see Betz/de Moll & Bischoff 2013). These empirical pathways could be used to identify challenges and pitfalls, along with the positive experiences of those involved in the partnerships, including parents. The research, however, would need to take into account parents’ diversity. This, in turn, would help analyze and explain the complicated mechanisms involved in producing and reproducing educational inequalities *in* families and at the *intersections* with educational institutions.

Finally, it is striking that the arguments within the discourse are almost exclusively concerned with the child’s wellbeing and his or her later success, and that the debate itself is characterized by a strong focus on the future. The children’s current experiences in educational institutions and families are ignored and almost no consideration is given to the fact that there can be no absolute

criterion for ensuring a child's wellbeing. The children themselves, moreover, play no role in the debate, neither conceptually nor empirically. Their specific role within the efforts to achieve greater collaboration and educational partnerships (among adults) remains unconsidered. Within the discourse and - according to one hypothesis - within the field of practice, children are turned into objects of collaboration and do not appear systematically as subjects (or even as partners). It would therefore be worthwhile to include *the children's perspective(s)* in the debate on "collaborating for their wellbeing." The calls for increased cooperation and educational partnerships and the developments leading towards them need to be problematized and empirically researched from the perspective of the children's position within the home-school and home-ECEC relationship.



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Abstract

The ideal of educational partnerships.

A critique of current debates on the cooperation between Early Childhood Education Centers, elementary schools and families

Tanja Betz, Goethe-University Frankfurt (Germany)

The cooperation between early childhood pedagogues, teachers and parents is an essential requirement of professional practice at daycare centers and elementary schools. At the same time, it is necessary for public and private actors who are jointly responsible for the upbringing of children to work on the connection between different spheres of children's lives. Linking diverse aspects of children's lives is crucial if educational inequality is to be reduced. Therefore, it is not surprising that the cooperation between Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC), schools and families has received more attention in the field of early education within the last few years. The curricula of all federal states in Germany emphasize the notion of cooperation, and the number of advanced training programs for early pedagogues and teachers has gone up dramatically. The demand for improving one's skills to cooperate effectively with parents is accompanied by specialized literature for professionals, how-to manuals and instruction booklets.

In recent years, the term "educational partnership" has been widely accepted by professionals in the field and in the discourse. It emphasizes the goal of establishing well-balanced and cooperative partnerships with parents on an eye-to-eye level. When it comes to political or professional statements, policy reform or shifts in professional practice in early childhood education, there is virtually no sign of public or professional criticism. Thus, the goals and accompanying and possibly negative effects of an intensified cooperation between professionals and parents are usually not discussed in detail. This is where the present study comes in. Its goal is to raise critical questions with respect to current debates on increasing parent-teacher cooperation in ECEC and elementary schools.

Basic questions of the study refer to what is actually meant by "educational partnership" and what standards are set in order to establish productive cooperation. From a critical perspective, the study recounts recent research that indicates the effectiveness of intensive cooperation. The goal is to stimulate a renewed discussion of "educational partnerships" that includes deeper empirical investigations of what makes up parent-teacher cooperation, and of what its consequences are for parents, children and professionals. Moreover, this study aims to contribute to ongoing debates on the reproduction of social inequality in education. In order to unveil the complex mechanisms of the reproduction of educational inequality the intersection of family and educational institutions needs a detailed and careful consideration.

About the author

Tanja Betz studied psychology, pedagogy, sociology and mediation at the University of Trier and Fernuniversität Hagen (Germany) and worked for many years as a school mediator in the Ruhr district. The subject of her doctoral thesis was “Unequal Childhoods,” part of a social reporting on living conditions of children in Germany. She was awarded the Prize for Young Academics by the Friends of Trier University in recognition of her dissertation. As director of the Office of Child and Youth Policy and the Office of the German Youth Advisory Board (an expert panel of the Federal Government), she worked for a number of years at the German Youth Institute in Munich, in particular in the area of policy-consulting. In 2010, she was awarded a Schumpeter Fellowship from the Volkswagen Foundation for her innovative EDUCARE research project located at Goethe University. She is currently professor of Childhood Studies and ECEC and Primary Education at Goethe University Frankfurt, director of the Institute for Elementary and Primary Education⁷² and member of the IDeA (Individual Development and Adaptive Education) research center, part of the LOEWE initiative for excellence in Hesse. Her areas of specialization encompass educational and childhood research for the age group birth to 10 years. Her research and teaching focus both on actors such as educational practitioners, teachers, parents, children and, and on child-related institutions such as early childhood education and care centers, primary schools and families. Her work examines how these actors contribute to overcoming unequal opportunities early in life and to the reproduction of social inequality. A further research focus is analyzing the interplay of organizational contexts and professional practices in ECEC and primary education.



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⁷² <https://qis.server.uni-frankfurt.de/qisserver/rds?moduleCall=webInfo&personal.pid=11242&publishConfFile=webInfoPerson&publishSubDir=personal&state=verpublish&status=init&topitem=members&vmfile=no&noDBAction=y&init=y>



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