

Summary  
Research  
Report 1

# Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Constraints

Collaboration between early childhood education and care centers and families: viewpoints and challenges

Tanja Betz, Stefanie Bischoff-Pabst, Nicoletta Eunicke and Britta Menzel



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# Foreword

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The family and early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers are the main lifeworlds children experience in their first years of life. Children, parents and educational professionals meet every day when children are brought to the center or picked up afterwards, or when festivities and parent-educator conferences take place. One goal often advanced in the educational debate is that, to promote children's well-being, families and ECEC centers should form an educational partnership and cooperate closely. Naturally, parents, educators and children themselves are also interested in having a good relationship with each other.

Yet what actually happens "on the ground" at the many interfaces of family and ECEC center? Which ideas and preferences do parents and educators have regarding their partnership? Which framework conditions are required if this partnership is to be shaped and lived every day, both at ECEC centers and at home? What role do children play in these interactions? Which opportunities – and constraints – result for children through parent-educator contact and greater family-ECEC cooperation? This topic is of particular interest given the oft-cited objective of using educational partnerships to promote fair educational opportunities.

The present study addresses these questions. To find answers, Tanja Betz from Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz and her colleagues dedicated more than a year to observing everyday activities at four German ECEC centers located in neighborhoods of varying degrees of affluence. They also conducted numerous interviews and organized discussions of the family-ECEC partnership with educational professionals, directors of ECEC centers, and parents. The resulting research provides – for the first time – empirical insights into how the interfaces between ECEC center and family are shaped on a daily basis.

The findings clearly show how varied parents' and educators' views of and preferences for cooperation are, along with the challenges they face:

Educators speak of the poor framework conditions at many ECEC centers, such as insufficient personnel, too little time and the heavy workload, all of which make it difficult to build trust and work well with parents on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, not all parents are sufficiently proficient in German, something that is generally a prerequisite for effective communication. This presents educators with a sizeable, daily challenge for which they must find creative and often time-consuming solutions. In many cases, moreover, misperceptions of purportedly "socially vulnerable" or "educationally deprived" families are a formidable

obstacle to well-functioning interactions. Here, the everyday situation at ECEC centers reflects the caveats and stereotypes found in the public debate taking place in Germany in general.

Parents, in contrast, have very different ideas about the appropriate forms and intensity of cooperation with ECEC centers. While some parents would like a vigorous exchange and childrearing tips, others consider such tips an inappropriate intrusion. Because of professional commitments, a number of parents simply lack the time to get more involved at their child's ECEC center, or they do not see the need to do so. Other parents, conversely, would like to know as much as possible about the center's day-to-day activities and about their child. They gladly volunteer their time or, in view of the often-difficult staffing situation, lend a helping hand. Other parents, in turn, distance themselves from the ECEC center due to language barriers and do not feel confident enough to join the advisory council or other participatory bodies.

The role children have within family-ECEC cooperation and their preferences regarding it are something most adults are, initially, unaware of. Moreover, it is a subject rarely discussed in the educational debate – the findings presented here make that clear as well. Yet children relay information, carry out errands and consciously try to gain support for their interests from both educators and parents, as a way of ensuring those interests prevail during cooperative interactions. Additionally, as the researchers' observations and interviews clearly show, when adults cooperate it does not automatically result in greater well-being for children. Parents and educators often join together instead – especially during drop-off and pick-up times – to override a child's clearly articulated wishes.

The findings show that shaping family-ECEC interfaces is an ambitious, challenging task for everyone involved. It requires ongoing dialogue and processes of negotiation that can account for the ideas and preferences present on all sides. Furthermore, the life and work situations of both educators and families must be considered, along with any cultural and social differences. Finally, more attention must be paid to how children have (or have not) participated in the family-ECEC relationship, so that their contribution can be made visible, and so that other opportunities for including them can be realized.

Ensuring all children have the chance to grow up well and receive a fair education means having a discussion – one that is intensive, but also well-considered and balanced – on how family-ECEC relations should be shaped. The mere desire to have or strive for an educational partnership, something that seems simple and harmonious at first glance, is no longer sufficient. The perspectives of everyone involved must also be considered, as must the conditions necessary for offering children a good education. ECEC centers must have access to the requisite resources, including sufficient, properly trained staff, and educators must have time to speak with others and to reflect – since only that will ensure the work being done at

the intersection of the family and ECEC is sensitive to inequalities and cultural differences, while also taking children's viewpoints into account.

The present study is meant to generate momentum for achieving that goal. We hope that the empirical insights provided by the researchers represent both a next step towards an educational debate on the subject and an advance in understanding in this field of inquiry. Since cooperation with families is a crucial issue for schools and ECEC centers, we are publishing a second research report by the team from Mainz, one developed for the project *Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Constraints*. The second report empirically examines the cooperation between families and primary schools and, in particular, the children's position within and their perspectives of it.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jörg Dräger".

**Dr. Jörg Dräger**  
Executive Board Member  
Bertelsmann Stiftung



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Stein".

**Anette Stein**  
Program Director  
Effective Investments in Education

# 1 The study: background, research questions, goals

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The overarching goal of the study *Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Constraints* is to gain empirical insights into the different perspectives of the actors – i.e. those of parents, children and educational professionals – of the “cooperation” between early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers and schools, on the one hand, and families, on the other. The present research report offers a synopsis of the relevant findings.<sup>1</sup> Nationally and internationally, considerable significance is ascribed in the educational and policy context to the shaping of the lifeworlds of children, as evinced by the term “educational partnership.” The study’s objective is to consider more closely the “cooperation” between ECEC centers and families and, in particular, the viewpoints and experiences of the adult actors, i.e. educators and parents, and to analyze them using an approach based on inequality theory (see e.g. Betz, 2015; Betz, Bischoff, Eunicke, Kayser, & Zink, 2017).

The term “cooperation” refers to a multidimensional and ambiguous term that can be observed and analyzed from different perspectives (e.g. those of occupational psychology and education theory), on different levels (e.g. interpersonal, interinstitutional, interprofessional) and in different settings (e.g. schools, ECEC centers) (Meyer-Siever, & Levin, 2016, p. 186). The term “cooperation” is thus being placed in quotation marks in this study, so as not to predetermine how it should be understood from a theoretical standpoint. This also signals that no programmatic definition is being offered for what should constitute “cooperation” between ECEC centers and families. The intention instead is to explore the different perspectives of the “cooperating” actors and observe the interactive processes taking place between educators and parents in practice. The goal of this process is thus to move toward an empirically sound understanding of “cooperation.” Consequently, the varied research questions addressed by this study (see below) pursue a shared interest: elucidating the “cooperation” between ECEC centers and families and how it is shaped in concrete, practical terms, and exploring which inequality-relevant factors are significant in this context.

The following research questions (and sub-questions) are addressed in the present study:

<sup>1</sup> This publication is a summary of the study’s first research report. The second report empirically examined children’s viewpoints of the family-school relationship and is available in German in a complete and abridged form under the title *Kinder zwischen Chancen und Barrieren. Zum Verhältnis von Familie und Grundschule aus der Sicht von Kindern: Ihre Perspektiven, ihre Positionen* under the following URL and DOI: [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/chancen-barrieren-schule](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/chancen-barrieren-schule), DOI 10.11586/2019063. An abridged version is also available in English at: [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/opportunities-constraints-school](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/opportunities-constraints-school) and DOI 10.11586/2020042.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS ON “COOPERATION” AS A MULTIPERSPECTIVE AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT

### Actors’ ideas of the educational partnership

Are the actors aware of the concept of the educational partnership and how do they view such partnerships between parents and educators?

What do they consider important?

### Experiencing “cooperation” – (sociocultural) fits, tensions and conflicts

How do the actors experience the shaping of the contact and their relationship to each other?

Which concrete experiences have they had?

Which fits, tensions and conflicts have those experiences brought to light?

### Situational practice for shaping contact

Which forms of contact between parents and educators exist at ECEC centers?

What do parents and educators talk about and what form does their contact take?

How are information and ideas (of childrearing) negotiated in everyday communication between the actors? How do the actors interact in these situations?

### Framework conditions for “cooperation”

From the educators’ perspective, which framework conditions (negatively) impact their everyday practice at ECEC centers?

How does this relate to the shaping of contact or “cooperation” with parents?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS ON REPRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY IN FAMILY-ECEC “COOPERATION”

### Categories of difference in “cooperation” with regard to parents

Which distinctions do parents and educators make when they speak about shaping contact with each other?

How do they create difference in this context with regard to parents?

Which distinctions and differences become relevant for family-ECEC “cooperation” in this context?

### Categories of difference in (sociocultural) fits, tensions and conflicts

To what extent do distinctions with regard to parents become relevant in the context of fits, tensions and conflicts in family-ECEC “cooperation”?

Which distinctions are particularly significant in situations that are experienced as fitting, tense or conflictual?

### Self-positionings of parents with regard to the production of difference and inequality

How do parents position themselves relative to other parents, educators, the requirements they face, etc., when it comes to shaping contact with the ECEC center?

Which parents position themselves as involved, self-confident and familiar with the ECEC center?

Which parents see themselves as less involved and as outsiders?

Which parents share their own ideas and interests, and which try to adapt to the center’s preferences?

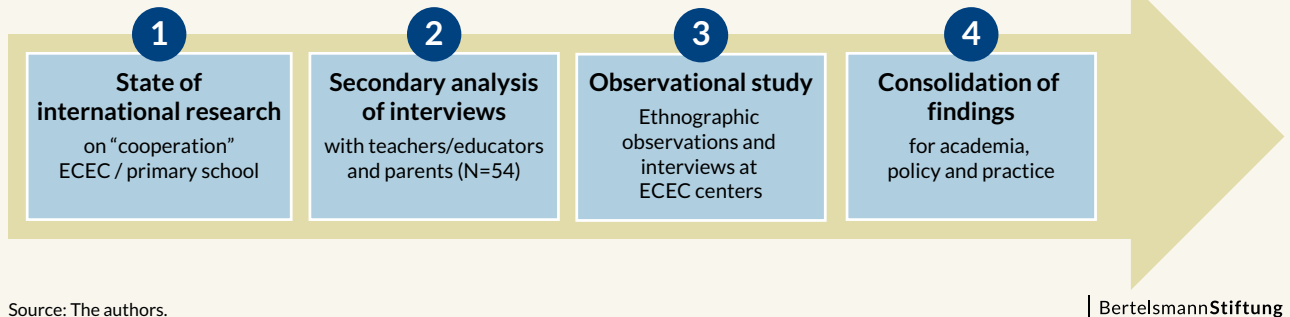
## RESEARCH QUESTIONS ON CHILDREN IN FAMILY-ECEC “COOPERATION”

How do children help shape family-ECEC relations?

Which ideas do parents and educators have (and which experiences have they had) regarding the inclusion of children in parent-educator conferences?

To answer these research questions, a qualitative approach was chosen and then applied in each of the individual project phases.

FIGURE 1 Project phases for the study Children at the Crossroads



Source: The authors.

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- (1): The first step in the process was to review the international research on "cooperation" in pre-primary and primary education, allowing points of overlap and research gaps to be identified (Betz et al., 2017; Bischoff, & Betz, 2018).
- (2): Interview data from the precursor EDUCARE study were then evaluated using secondary analysis. The data were gathered during guided interviews with parents and educators (N=27, of which 13 were parents).<sup>2</sup>
- (3): In a parallel third step, ethnographic observations and guided interviews (N=39) were conducted at different points in time over the course of approximately one year at four ECEC centers. These are the empirical core of the current findings. The observations stem from the researchers' presence in a number of situations, including when children were dropped off at and picked up from ECEC centers; festivities at the centers; parents' evenings and parents cafés; and parent-educator conferences. The interview data from the EDUCARE study (2) and the observational study (3) were also collectively evaluated in several analyses.
- (4): The project concluded with a consolidation of the findings, ensuring they will be available to researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

<sup>2</sup> The data were collected for the EDUCARE study, which was led by Professor Tanja Betz and ran from 2010 to 2016. Supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, the study examined models of "good childhood" and inequalities in children's lives. It was carried out at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main in Germany and at the IDeA research center. More information is available (in German) at: [www.allgemeine-erziehungswissenschaft.uni-mainz.de/projekt-educare](http://www.allgemeine-erziehungswissenschaft.uni-mainz.de/projekt-educare) (accessed January 8, 2020).

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## 2 Research design, sampling and methodology

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Primary data collection (observational study: step 3) took place at four ECEC centers for children between 3 and 6 years of age in the German federal states of Hesse and Baden–Württemberg. To gain an empirical understanding of the specifics of “cooperating” with parents of different social backgrounds, heterogeneous facilities with contrasting characteristics were selected using predetermined criteria (Kelle, & Kluge, 2010). Thus, centers were chosen that were located in socially diverse catchment areas in major cities. The goal was to capture a wide range of variations and challenges in the “cooperation” taking place between differently situated families and ECEC centers. Therefore, a key criterion for choosing the facilities was their socio–spatial situation. Two neighborhoods were selected with a relatively high percentage of residents who receive social assistance, who are unemployed and who are of non–German heritage. In addition, a neighborhood was included that has an average percentage of individuals meeting the described characteristics, as was a neighborhood with a low percentage of these individuals. After choosing two socially marginalized neighborhoods along with one average and one relatively privileged neighborhood, the ECEC centers located in each of these areas were visited and compared. Centers were contacted that were operated by major public ECEC providers (church–affiliated or municipal)<sup>3</sup> and that did not fall below a minimum size limit (serving at least 60 children). In addition, attention was paid to selecting “ordinary” facilities, i.e. facilities that were not offering an above–average number of opportunities for parental involvement during the period under observation, or that had already been recognized in one way or another for their work with parents. The ethnographic survey for the present study was carried out by several researchers between the summer of 2016 and the autumn of 2017. As a rule, data were collected throughout the day, from 7 am to 5 pm. At two of the four facilities, data collection took place during four weeks scheduled at regular intervals throughout the year (approximately one every three months). At the third center, data collection occurred over a total of three weeks and, at the fourth, over the course of one week. As part of this field work, 39 interviews were conducted with parents and educators, then transcribed and evaluated (19 parents, 20 educators including facility directors).

3 For more on the ECEC system in Germany, see Oberhuemer and Schreyer, 2017.

### *Survey methodology: interviews and participant observations*

In terms of its design, the study avails itself of multiple methodologies and perspectives: Data were collected and evaluated from observations of and interviews with the participating parents and educators. Given the present study's research objectives, this design seems particularly appropriate for three reasons.

First, following Honig's theoretical approach (e.g. 2012) and in view of their own work, the researchers assume that the world experienced within the ECEC centers is "not a special world that follows its own laws, but rather the inner world of an outer world – a social environment that is determined not only by pedagogical personnel, but also by children, not only by pedagogical goals, but also by the facility's organizational character and, not least, by social expectations"<sup>4</sup> (Honig, 2012, p. 91; Betz, & de Moll, 2015). These expectations are multifaceted and diverse and – as posited by the researchers' initial assumption – have a decisive influence on the practice of "cooperation" at ECEC centers situated in varied social environments. The analysis of such heterogeneous expectations for the family-ECEC relationship is one focus of the present study.

Second, the aim is to focus on different moments that create a social order at the facilities (Alkemeyer, & Buschmann, 2016). To do this, the subjective and site-specific perspectives of the participating actors were elucidated through interviews, on the one hand, and the relevant interactions in situational practice were examined through participant observations, on the other. Both by shedding light on the subjective viewpoints of those involved and by observing interactions on site, differing viewpoints were integrated to create the most comprehensive image possible of "cooperation" between the ECEC center and family on the micro-level.

Third, in order to investigate structures of power and inequality, it is useful to make visible the hegemonistic – i.e. the prevailing and generally accepted – constructs that exist for ordering a field. Classifications and (re)evaluations in the form of distinctions constituting such constructs are found, on the one hand, in the actors' different attitudes and ideas. On the other, they are also "hidden," embedded in the daily interactions, rules and practices of organization and mutual exchange, and must be reconstructed. Recalling the theory of the *sociocultural fit* (e.g. Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1977; Helsper, Kramer, & Thiersch, 2014) it is worthwhile, on the one hand, to see which behaviors are experienced in the context of "cooperation" as *fitting* and commensurate to the prevailing, accepted constructs at the ECEC centers. It is revealing, on the other, to ask at which points and in which constellations *tensions* or open *conflicts* arise. For example, it is possible to analyze which parental behaviors conform to the ideas of childrearing and education found at the facility, and how parents and educators respond when behaviors or ideas do not fit.

The guidelines used for the **interviews** served as a framework for asking participants to share as freely as possible their subjective perceptions and experiences of the subject at hand (Friebertshäuser, & Langer, 2010). The guidelines (for parents and educators, respectively) were structured to reflect the main research questions and took into account the researchers' prior experiences with interviews at ECEC

4 This and all other excerpts from German-language source publications have been translated into English for this research report.

centers. In addition to information on voluntary participation in the study and on privacy, the following five thematic areas were addressed: (1) introductory information about the family (parents) or professional background (educators), (2) experience with “cooperation” at the current facility (in general, but also in terms of parental involvement and the participation of children, for example), (3) preferences for shaping “cooperation” (4) the concept of the educational partnership and (5) topics chosen by the interviewee (where applicable).

The **participant observations** at the ECEC centers were based on ethnographic research practices (Breidenstein, Hirschauer, Kalthoff, & Nieswand, 2013; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The observations were recorded as field notes, which were then transformed into observation protocols as quickly as possible, using an intensive writing process. The protocols contain detailed depictions of concrete situations; the authors’ own thoughts; ideas and memoranda on what was observed; and records of ethnographic conversations and short interviews. As descriptions, the protocols are necessarily selective and interpretive; relevant elements are identified and numerous aspects are omitted. This makes it necessary to reflect on the criteria for determining relevance (Flämig, 2017) and how to address this in the research process. While some criteria in the present study were determined by the subject of the research itself, such as the focus on parent-educator interactions and the creation of difference in such processes of exchange, other focus points were generated during the fieldwork and further developed through the analytical process.

#### *Content-analytic interpretation of the interviews and observation protocols*

The interviews with parents and educators and the ethnographic observations at the ECEC centers were primarily evaluated using content analysis. A key aspect here was the systematic, category-based process, which was used to analyze all the material, including through hermeneutic reflection (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 26),<sup>5</sup> and which was sufficient to treat the comprehensive dataset in a systematic, social-scientific manner (Mayring, 2015, p. 10)<sup>6</sup>. In a first step, the different text types were carefully read and subjectively considered. As part of this process, initial memoranda and thoughts were recorded and initial inductive and deductive coding was undertaken of both a descriptive (e.g. *spontaneous, informal interactions*) and analytical (e.g. *tensions*) nature. This first systematization occurred in accordance with the study’s general subject of investigation – how “cooperation” between the family and ECEC center is shaped – and the inequality-related factors stemming from it. An open approach was used throughout the coding procedure, one that can be understood, in light of grounded theory (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 101), as a “creative process” (Breuer, Muckel, & Dieris, 2018, p. 249) that makes it possible to develop “novel vocabulary for the reconstruction and clarification of a chosen problem or area of activity” (ibid.). In a second step, the main categories thus developed were applied to all the material, then further developed and tested for robustness. As part of the validity check, test excerpts were read and coded a second time by different researchers. In a third step, the material was again examined and the categorization system further differentiated by creating new, primarily inductive

<sup>5</sup> Kuckartz (2014) has also published in English on qualitative text analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Mayring (2014) has also published in English on qualitative content analysis.

sub-codes for the main categories. Once this first coding process was complete for all the material at hand, a total of three complex categorization systems had been assembled for (1) the parents' perspective, (2) the educators' perspective and (3) situational practice. Each system consists of 14 to 20 main categories which contain both homologies, i.e. categories present in all three systems (e.g. *tensions*), and categories that differ from those in the other systems (e.g. *parents' activities at the ECEC center* → situational practice). The sub-analysis of the three focus areas ("cooperation" as a multiperspective and multidimensional concept; difference and inequality in family-ECEC "cooperation"; children in family-ECEC "cooperation") made use of this system of categorization. Thematically consolidated in this manner, the material was once again systematized according to specific questions (for details, see Betz, Bischoff-Pabst, Eunicke, & Menzel, 2019).

#### *Sequence analysis of select phenomena*

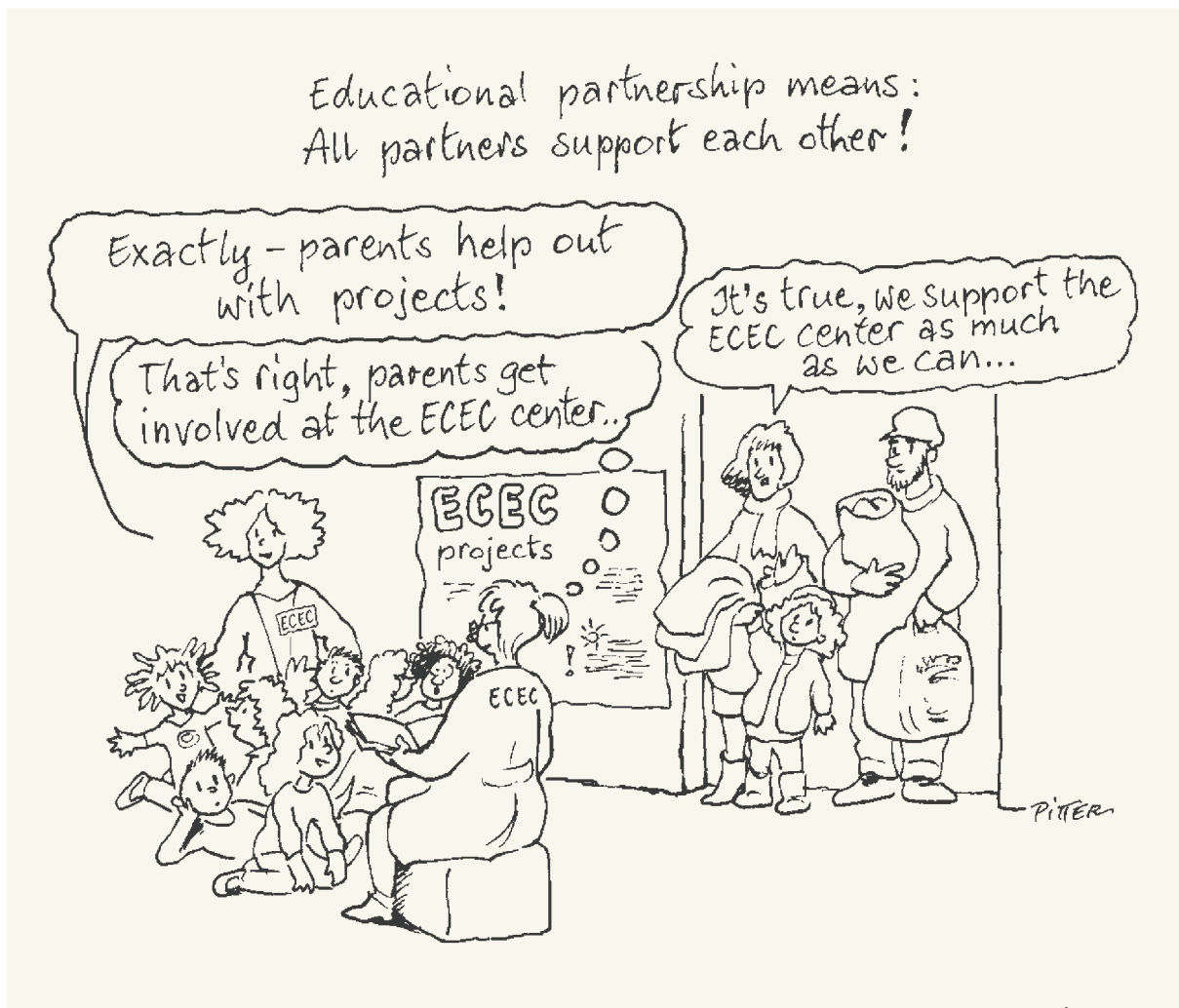
While content-analytic or open coding from grounded theory is used for the material in general, analysis of individual cases or phenomena is based on exemplary instances. A case is "a particular unit of data that seems promising for gaining new perspectives and even generalizations about a field and its structures, about processes and dynamics" (Breidenstein et al., 2013, p. 139). Ultimately, generalizations must be made plausible through their compatibility with the overall study and with other analysis and theoretical arguments (ibid., p. 140). Five criteria are significant for selecting cases and phenomena for such analysis: data quality (e.g. detail-rich, nuanced subject matter), the spectrum of potential cases (principle of contrast), the case's relevance in the field, the case's conspicuous nature, and its uniqueness (ibid., p. 141). Moreover, three forms of case analysis can be identified: First, events and phenomena are queried in terms of their significance and function for the field under examination. Second, interactions and verbal exchanges are sequentially reconstructed according to their progressive logic. Third, specific individuals are selected and analyzed to see how they are addressed in various situations. The "responsible mother" is an example of one mode of address which arises from social practice and which can have ramifications for actors in the field. Such attributions are not admitted to the ethnographic (case) analysis; a change of perspective is engendered by *observing* such attributions instead (ibid., p. 152). Based on the processes used in case analysis, specific phenomena which proved intriguing in terms of the content-analytic findings were selected and sequentially analyzed – for example, with regard to the modes of address, positionings and orientations for taking action of both parents and educators.

The following begins with a summary presentation of the findings from the empirical analysis based on the focal points (see research questions) described above. Challenges are then identified which impact the shaping of the family-ECEC relationship – especially given social inequalities and the resulting power structures which manifest between parents and educators. After all, these unequal relationships can influence a child's success in the educational system. The framework conditions and resources required for shaping "cooperation" between children, parents and educators in an inequality-sensitive manner are among the challenges discussed, as is the need for further research.

### 3 Findings from the empirical analysis

#### *Ideas about the educational partnership*

In a first step, the ideas that educators and parents have about the *educational partnership* were subjected to a more detailed empirical analysis. The results show that, across the perspectives involved, the educational partnership can be understood as a specific form of “cooperation.” Three dimensions become evident in the *conceptualizations of the educational partnership*: The participants feel that the educational partnership is about building and maintaining relationships; is a process of negotiation; is a means of achieving future goals. At the same time, not all educators and only few parents are familiar with the concept of the educational partnership, which is becoming increasingly prevalent in policy, practice and research.



In addition to ideas found across the different perspectives, ideas specific to certain actors were also identified. For educators, a key aspect of the educational partnership is involving parents in the daily routine at the ECEC center, especially in activities that provide support (e.g. for festivities or projects).

For parents, the educational partnership engenders a broad range of expectations, from the desire to be given guidance and advice to the attitude that their views should be sought when important decisions are made.

*Problems implementing the educational partnership* were also a subject that came up during the interviews. Both parties – parents and educators – question the viability of realizing such a partnership, seeing difficulties in shaping the relationship, in framework conditions, in parental involvement and in social expectations. Educators mention preconditions applying both to individual cases (e.g. parents must show interest) and to entire groups (e.g. the need for German-language skills). Parents, too, feel that the concept of the educational partnership is ambitious and perceive a number of difficulties, including that they as parents are not sufficiently qualified to enter into a partnership with trained educators, that they (might) pursue their own interests, and that they could have too little time due to professional responsibilities. Poor framework conditions are also mentioned by parents as a problem impeding the educational partnership.

*Positions opposing the educational partnership* also became evident in the interviews and observations. Parents and educators doubt whether such a partnership makes sense, for example with regard to giving parents an equal say at ECEC centers. Educators criticize the strong focus on formal education, i.e. developing skills for school, which is present in the concept itself, in policy writings on the partnership and in the high expectations parents often have that such skills should be developed. In some cases, parents also feel that too much emphasis is being put on formal education. Nevertheless, some parents see the educational partnership as sensible and necessary not for their own children, but for “others,” e.g. children of “other” cultural backgrounds. Finally, some parents and educators maintain that there is no need for an educational partnership at all.

#### *Experiences with “cooperation”*

##### *Fits*

An analysis of the data allowed *sociocultural fits* to be identified, which can be grouped into five dimensions. These include, *first*, behaviors by parents and educators that are seen as positive. When educators speak about parents, they emphasize, among other things, that the latter get involved at the ECEC center and support it. They also see it as fitting and appropriate when parents are broad-minded, signal interest, accept help from educators and interact with them. Parents, in turn, appreciate it when educators are cheerful, friendly, committed, and open to parents’ concerns. Parents also like it when educators are affectionate, emotionally available for children and “motherly.” From the parents’ perspective, it is also possible to speak about a fit when educators inform parents about specific occasions or topics, when they signal that they are open to communicating with parents and when they evince understanding for parents’ individual life circumstances.



Another aspect that can be counted as a fit is, *second*, the mutual, positively perceived shaping of the relationship. Each side describes having positive relationships with the other, something that gets expressed, for example, as well-functioning communication and mutual trust. With regard to parents, educators emphasize good communication, which means being able to speak easily with each other, and being relaxed, open and cordial. Something they also view as positive is having friendly and personal interactions with parents. For some educators, good relationships are also trouble-free relationships. This is predicated, above all, on the desire to have an ECEC facility that runs smoothly. For educators, this results from exchanges that are uncomplicated and that save time and, in particular, from parents who follow through on any agreements they make and who respect the center's rules.

A diverse range of viewpoints pertaining to good communication becomes evident when, conversely, parents speak about educators. One aspect the parents mention here is having an informal, friendly relationship. Another is when educators acknowledge topics that are of interest to parents and children. At the same time, some parents express the desire to communicate with educators in a different way, namely one that addresses specific issues and focuses more on educational topics, as opposed to one that is ongoing and casual. Another aspect that contributes to a good relationship for parents is when they feel they can rely on educators. They count on them to relay important information and to be available to talk whenever the need for an exchange arises.

A *third* dimension – one that can be seen as a specific form of sociocultural fit separate from the positive shaping of the parent-educator relationship – is when educators and parents reach a consensus on the actions taken on a child's behalf. Both sides describe interactions that explicitly aim at achieving a common goal. The goal – deciding on the proper time for a child to begin primary school, for example, or providing a child with special assistance – is jointly identified or is proposed by one side and accepted by the other, although educators tend to predominate here. Some educators appreciatively emphasize that parents adopt their ideas and views, and accept childrearing tips and proposed solutions when they are offered. Educators position themselves in these narratives as the knowledgeable ones in two regards: first, as knowing how to deal with the child at the ECEC center and, second, in some cases also at home. Conversely, parents appreciate that educators support and assist them, for example by providing childrearing tips, taking them seriously in their role as parents and getting involved on behalf of their child. Another aspect that is viewed as positive is when parents can and do seek educators' advice if decisions must be made, and when both sides work together to identify the "best way forward." Here, too, it becomes clear that, overall, parents have a wide range of needs when it comes to receiving support.

The *fourth* dimension revealed by the interviews and observations is consensus-driven interactions, not only when the issue at hand is the child, but, from the parents' perspective, when it concerns the ECEC center itself. Parents say that they gladly volunteer to assist at the center, e.g. accompanying excursions, organizing events or helping out when there is a staffing shortage. The shared goal often has to do with offering appealing, effective activities at the center. Parental involvement here is limited by the amount of time they have at their disposal. Moreover, parents describe how they benefit from their involvement: They remain up to date on daily

happenings at the ECEC center, something that would not otherwise be possible to the same extent.

Satisfaction with the ECEC center – on the part of parents – is also important as a *fifth* dimension of family-ECEC “cooperation.” This can refer to the center in general or to certain aspects, such as the pedagogical concept or the physical premises. What is relevant here for parents is the center’s “organizational culture”: a positive climate, friendly and familial interactions, and the way in which parent-educator conferences are organized. Parents are also satisfied when various and specific activities are offered for the children and when their own child feels at home. In addition, they find it important for the center to meet their needs, i.e. that possibilities exist to make contact with other parents or that the children are well cared for even if a staffing shortage occurs. In terms of satisfaction, parents also exhibit a wide range of perspectives.

### *Tensions*

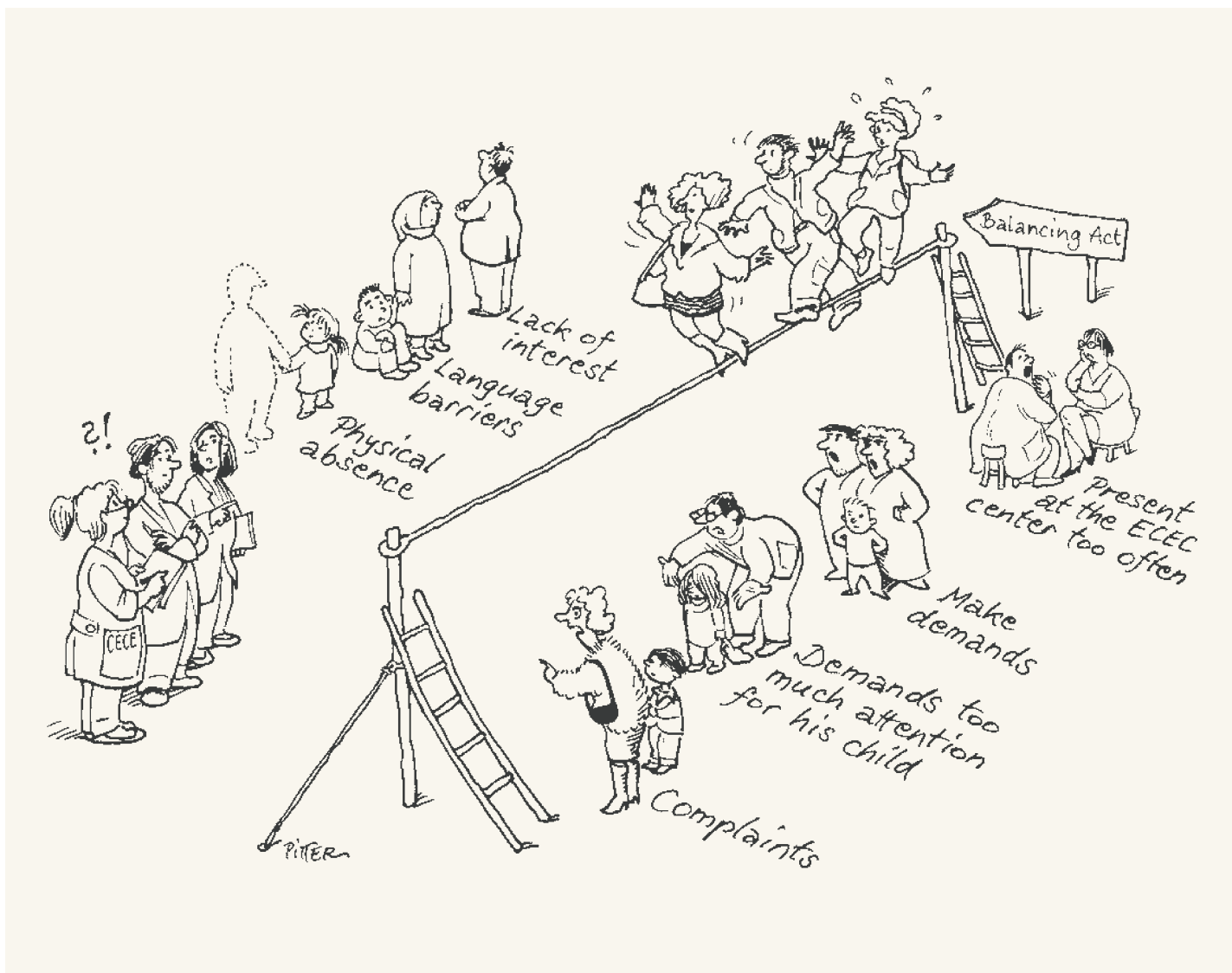
In addition to sociocultural fits, *instances evincing various levels of tension* were identified using the dataset and grouped into three dimensions. Here, problematizing judgements and classifications made by parents and educators become apparent, both those relating to how the contact between the two sides is shaped and those relating to how one side views the other.

The *first* dimension depicts how educators or parents are dealt with. Educators, above all, describe various difficulties dealing with parents; they find it a source of tension, for example, when parents are passive and withdrawn. In the same breath, they speak of parents whom they perceive as distancing themselves, being physically absent or having a lack of interest. Tensions also arise when parents are (too) active and demanding, or when they complain. Some educators experience pressure, moreover, if they feel they are being watched as they work by parents who are visiting the ECEC center. The demands made by parents are sometimes seen to be divergent or even contradictory. Additional tensions result when parents have (overly) high standards that educators consider inappropriate, problematic or, given the center’s working conditions, virtually impossible to meet. Similarly, tense situations arise when parents and educators have different ideas of what the center’s rules should be or how children should be raised and educated.

Parents, in turn, describe experiencing tension when they do not receive information about their child, i.e. when they do not know what their child does at the ECEC center. They also report having different ideas than educators when it comes to “proper” childrearing, the child’s behavior, and approaches to dealing with specific issues. Tension also results when parents feel educators are unmotivated and/or overly assertive, for example when they are strict with children or (try to) educate the parents.

The *second* dimension addresses incorrect or difficult behavior on the part of parents or educators, which can refer to how the child is treated and to the interactions parents and educators have with each other. Educators express an opinion here comparatively more often and in more detail than parents do. They call attention to what they feel is improper childrearing and education by parents: They criticize how parents are raising the child in question (their emotional state, their

approach to childrearing, the free-time activities they organize), citing a wide range of topics. On the one hand, educators have the impression that parents take too little responsibility for and pay too little attention to the child, describing them as too “lazy” or “comfortable” to adequately support the child’s development. On the other hand, parents are depicted as unreasonable, for example if they do not acknowledge or if they reject educators’ observations and conclusions. Educators also grow frustrated when their positioning as the expert or the knowledge bearer is not recognized by parents.



Educators also view parents critically when the latter are seen to be unreliable, e.g. when they do not adhere to the ECEC center’s rules (pick-up and drop-off times), fail to fulfill requests or miss deadlines. The same is true when parents evince poor communications skills, e.g. by yelling at their children, or when they absent themselves, e.g. by not responding to a request for a conference or by having friends or relatives drop off or pick up the child.

When speaking about educators, parents report tensions arising from interactions with the child, e.g. when educators yell or scold, or when they pay too little attention to the child, dress the child improperly, etc. Tensions also arise for parents from their own interactions with educators when the latter's style of communication is deemed inappropriate, i.e. when parents are lectured to, treated condescendingly or not provided sufficient support when decisions must be made.

The *third* dimension pertaining to tensions results for parents when they are dissatisfied with the ECEC center. Above all, parents express dissatisfaction when they are not happy with the center itself or its various aspects; less often do they focus on educators' behavior. For example, they criticize the center's method of sharing information, i.e. it is ineffective or lacking entirely, or dislike the fact that insufficient opportunities exist for communicating with other parents, or that too few parent-educator conferences take place. Structural conditions can also be a source of tension: too few staff or activities, or activities that get cancelled.

Finally, tensions stemming from conflicting interpretations are also apparent. These are tensions which, as depicted in the reports and narratives, evolve into concrete, open disagreements and conflicting attempts to negotiate interpretations. Such conflicts are mentioned more often in the interviews by educators than by parents.

#### *Structural conditions for "cooperation"*

Educators refer to various structural conditions that impact "cooperation" with parents. They criticize inadequate structures relating to personnel such as staffing shortages (both temporary and systemic), a lack of professional resources and poor staff-child ratios. They also find certain aspects difficult which relate to the ECEC center itself, such as its financial and (socio-)spatial resources, not to mention personnel/staff resources and a lack of time. Educators feel that poor framework conditions at an ECEC center also have a negative effect on personal resources. They report having a heavy workload (resulting in stress, frustration, burnout, etc.). In their view, such conditions impact "cooperation" with families in a specific, negative manner: They are able to meet neither their own standards nor those set by outsiders (e.g. the center's provider), and the way daily activities must necessarily be carried out is at odds with the programmatic requirements determining what should be achieved at the center.

#### *Everyday contact between parents and educators*

Using the ethnographic observations, it was possible to examine numerous everyday instances of contact between educators and parents. The analysis is based on multiple situations in which the primary feature is a consensual exchange between parents and educators and in which both sides express shared viewpoints (with each other). Parents often address educators as the ones possessing the relevant knowledge and, thus, power. In the same way, educators position themselves as experts and decision makers: They explicate and enforce rules, or grant exceptions. Also evident are viewpoints on different topics that are shared by educators and parents, such as ideas of how children should be raised.



Moreover, educators and parents join forces when children are dropped off at the center or picked up from it. They position themselves in opposition to the child, for example when the child explicitly expresses a conflicting desire (verbally or gesturally), such as not wanting to stay at the center or wanting to remain there longer. Educators and parents ally themselves in such situations in a variety of ways, prevailing over the child.

Authoritative positions are negotiated here, although – similar to the processes of communication that take place during parent-educator conferences – the educator determines the “correct” action in such situations, often verbalizing it (again). In many cases, parents (and children) tacitly accept this and acquiesce.

It is during spontaneous, informal interactions in particular that educators and parents exchange diverging ideas on topics pertaining to the intersection of family and ECEC center, such as daily procedures and (new) pick-up times. In these situations, the participants compete over whose viewpoint should prevail. As the interaction progresses, opposing attitudes in a given situation or towards a specific topic can be left unresolved, or they can be compared and an amicable solution found. In some cases, the situation grows rancorous.

Tension-filled interactions occur during drop-off and pick-up times in particular. Educators and parents act in a contradictory, irreconcilable manner towards each other, something that does not, however, result in open conflict. What becomes evident, instead, is that the parents cede the leading role to the educator (e.g. as to how the child should be dressed given current weather conditions). In other interactions, educators point out parents' disregard of the center's rules while communicating (with the child) and by reinforcing the rules (e.g. closing the center's door), thereby reiterating the infringement. In addition to these implicit negotiations between educator and parents about who will prevail, a child's infringement of the rules sometimes becomes the explicit subject of dispute, together with "incorrect" behavior on the part of the mother or parents.

A clear asymmetry is apparent in the tense encounters observed between educators and parents, namely between the ECEC center and educators, on the one side, and the parent or parents, on the other. This asymmetry skews to the parents' disadvantage in that educators' interpretations of the center's rules are given precedence, as are their ideas of how children should be dealt with (at the center). As a rule, parents adapt to the institutional conditions and requirements, including by withdrawing from certain situations. Open disagreement or conflict were not observed at the centers studied; what was seen instead were instances where individual parents expressed doubt or offered limited resistance.

#### *Difference and inequality – differences with regard to parents*

The distinction most frequently found in the interviews, one made by both parents and educators, is between families or parents ascribed a non-native background ("with a migration background," "foreign," etc.) and families or parents originally from Germany. When it comes to "cooperation," speaking German is thus an important criterion for differentiation. The participant observations in particular show that not being conversant in German is a major challenge for the verbal communication that takes place between parents and educators. Other frequent categorizations are the "social background" of individual parents ("lower classes"), the social situation of entire urban areas ("Hartz IV neighborhood")<sup>7</sup> and parents who have a "high/low level of education." Other categories found less often include "gender," "occupation," "culture," "religion" and "generation." These groupings and intersectionalities are also present in the current public debate and the educational discourse on "cooperation."

In terms of the *fits, tensions* and *conflicts* in family-ECEC "cooperation," *migration/nationality/background* and *language* are significant categories of difference across all perspectives, as is *culture* in its intersections with the other categories, although educators tend to differentiate in this manner more than parents do.

Educators feel it is fitting when parents speak German or are learning it. Positive parental behavior is described accordingly: as facilitating understanding and allowing (educational) suggestions to be adopted. The parents "with a migration background" who are described in particularly positive terms make contact with educators, are open and network with other parents (the opposite would be remote-

<sup>7</sup> Hartz IV is the colloquial expression for a benefit paid by the German Federal Employment Agency that serves to ensure a person's livelihood. Its legal basis is Germany's Social Security Code (Sozialgesetzbuch, SGB II).

ness on the part of parents, e.g. during the acclimatization period). It is also seen as fitting when parents share emancipatory social values; “immigrant” mothers who are perceived to be self-confident, for example, are praised. Moreover, it is viewed positively when “immigrant” parents share exotic foods or dances at the ECEC center. In the material analyzed, educators almost never distance themselves from ethnically coded categorizations – with very few exceptions. What can be observed instead is an unquestioning acceptance of categorizations generally present in society, such as “migration background.”

In the context of tensions, speaking German (or not) is also the key difference when educators describe parents. Given the monolingual norm in ECEC centers, multilingualism is seen as a challenge in that it makes communication more difficult (since it requires translators, individual effort, additional meetings, etc.). Parents are assigned (co)responsibility for ensuring an effective exchange of information. Language barriers make it impossible to provide all parents with the same opportunities for giving and receiving information; in this context, educators consider it a source of tension that additional resources must be committed to reaching parents who do not speak German. It is apparent from the comments made by several educators that certain parents are excluded from the communication that takes place during informal, fleeting meetings. Moreover, questions which arise in such situations cannot be addressed due to the language barrier, something that is therefore described as a source of tension.

Parents labeled as immigrants are sometimes described as “other.” They deviate in unfavorable ways – from certain institutional norms such as punctuality, for example. Culturalist explications also occur, e.g. what is “good” for children must be explained to these parents. Educators position themselves in this context as knowledgeable, and parents or mothers as laypeople. Parents labeled as immigrants are seen in particular as needing to be educated and as teachable, and their childrearing efforts become the target of pedagogical interventions.

In addition to the categories of difference relating to migration and language, educators also *categorize parents in social terms*. In doing so, they primarily use homogenizing depictions of the ECEC center’s specific “clientele.” Educators characterize groups of parents as “socially weak” or “uneducated” when they speak of those served by the facility. Such characterizations – so-called individuations of certain cohorts – position these groups of parents as deviating negatively from the norm: They have less (formal) education, for example, than parents “normally” do. In the analyzed interviews, considerable understanding is accorded parents who are viewed as “socially weak” or “less educated,” even if they are ascribed no positive characteristics. A typical concatenation here is to describe a “socially weak,” “low-education” clientele with limited financial resources and a large percentage of immigrants. When an ECEC center serves the socially disadvantaged children of this clientele, its task thus becomes to ensure their basic needs are met while imparting social skills, language and education. In this context, the ECEC center appears to be the “better” place for the child. At the same time, the supporting resources are meant not only for children, but also for parents, who are perceived as needing assistance when it comes to both educational and organizational issues. Viewing parents as deficient who have limited financial means – or perceiving a specific, purportedly “socially weak” clientele (see above) – suggests asymmetric interventions more than partnerships between equals.

### *Self-positionings of parents with different social backgrounds vis-à-vis educators and ECEC centers*

Following a detailed examination of the positionings of parents vis-à-vis educators and ECEC centers, three types can be identified:

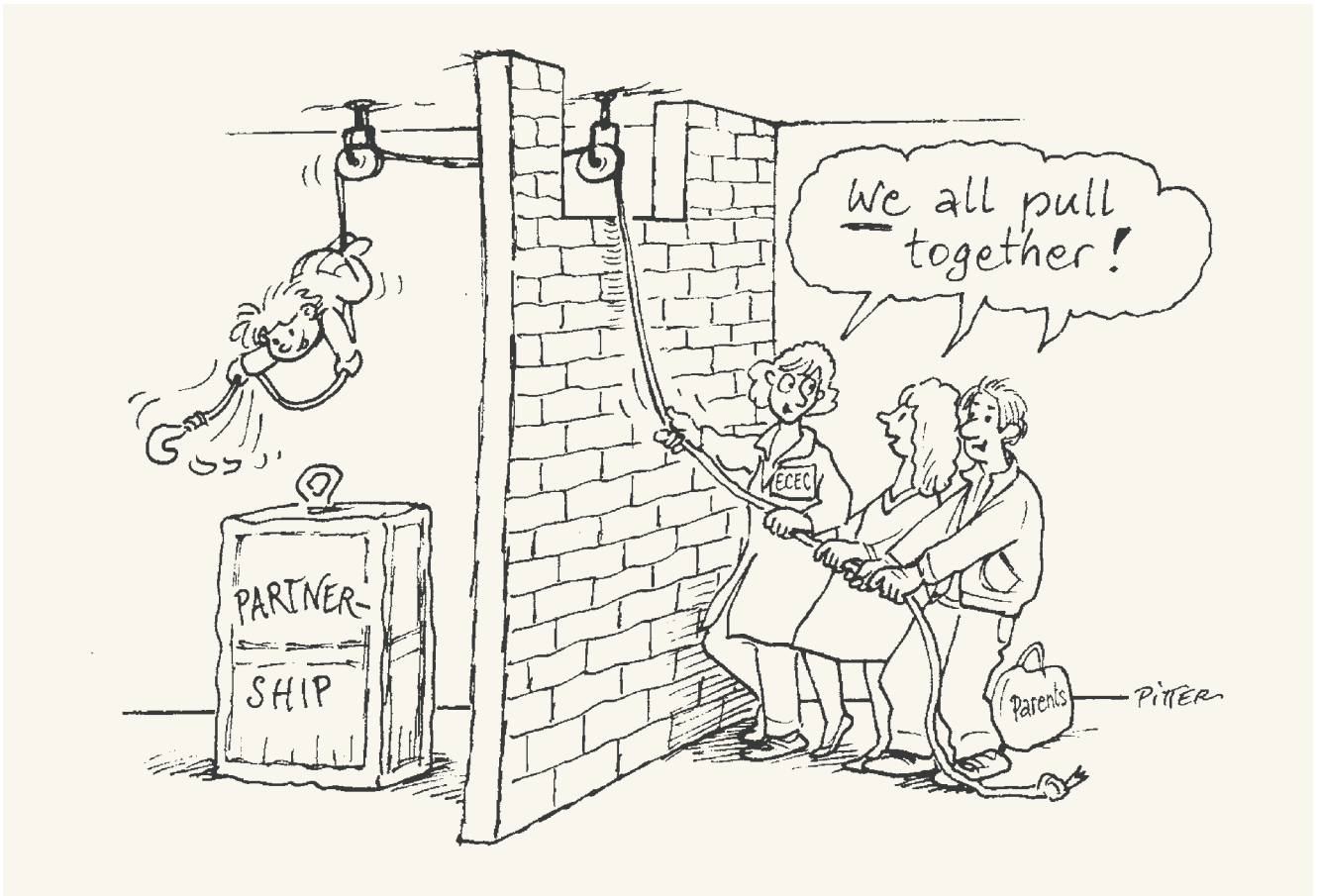
- *Self-confident positionings* on the part of parents indicate interviewees with resource-rich backgrounds and a secure and distinct habitus. The individuals classified in this group speak fluent German. All live in committed partnerships and their occupations suggest a high level of cultural and, in some cases, economic capital. In terms of their self-presentation, they view themselves as proactive and networked with other similar parents. In addition, they describe themselves as very well informed and they ask educators to provide feedback.
- *Purposeful positionings* on the part of parents are typical of mid-level backgrounds and an assimilated, ambitious habitus. These parents tend to have occupations traditionally associated with the middle class (e.g. tradesmen). They are willing to help and get involved in the ECEC center, even if this willingness does not always result in actual involvement. Effort is clearly made here to adhere to the center's rules and regulations (e.g. being present for festivities). Positive feedback from educators is important to these parents.
- *Remote positionings* can be seen among parents who tend to be coping with the challenges of everyday life, indicating individuals living in more precarious circumstances. Two of the speakers are single parents. The data collected suggest precarious employment situations and limited economic capital. In terms of self-presentation, these parents portray themselves as being unknowledgeable and uninformed about the center's procedures. These information gaps persist despite the parents' efforts and, in some cases, a sense of powerlessness can be discerned (e.g. with regard to strategies for acquiring information). Overall, they are comparatively less involved in the relevant activities, e.g. in helping their child do well at the ECEC center.

### *Children in family-ECEC "cooperation"*

From the perspective of educators and parents, the role of children in family-ECEC cooperation and in shaping the family-ECEC relationship is non-existent. In terms of their attitudes and how they address the subject, the interviewees do not automatically assume that children contribute to the relationship or shape it. Educators and parents, in contrast, are quite naturally and directly involved in shaping family-ECEC relations.

When explicitly asked, interviewees provide various descriptions of how children are involved in family-ECEC "cooperation," e.g. by telling parents or educators about the ECEC center or their home life, and by establishing contact – often passively, but sometimes actively – between the center and home. Children also talk about daily activities, relay organizational information and recount specific experiences.





From the perspective of educators and parents, children establish contact primarily to serve their own interests, for example when they want to work together to solve problems. In addition, the child and what he/she has to say is used for making contact between the educator and parent(s); the adults' interests are primarily pursued in such cases, for example the acquisition of additional information.

Moreover, including children in parent-educator conferences is a topic that none of the interviewees is familiar with. When considering it hypothetically, educators and parents make the inclusion of children in such conferences contingent on a variety of conditions that largely pertain to the children themselves, e.g. their stage of development. Not only are certain conditions and requirements set as prerequisites, including the child is considered more feasible when the child's behavior, development and abilities are seen as being within the normal range. Including children to whom this does not apply is thus viewed as less appropriate.

Based on these findings, a number of challenges have been identified and are outlined below.

## 4 Challenges for shaping family-ECEC “cooperation”

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Shaping family-ECEC relations – and, more specifically, “cooperation” between the two – is a core task for policy makers and practitioners on different levels and in different societal subsystems: for public and private providers, at institutions offering education and training, for parental representatives, within the educational discourse, in policy, etc. As this research report shows, educators, parents and children (along with researchers) play a crucial role in how “cooperation” between the ECEC center and family is shaped, namely through a complex interplay of current everyday realities and the requirements resulting from them, and organizational, professional and societal needs.

The empirical insights depicted in the separate sections of this research report can be condensed into specific challenges. The challenges depicted here are based on a *reflexive, inequality-sensitive understanding of “cooperation”* between the ECEC center and the family (Honig, Joos, & Schreiber, 2004). This understanding assumes that “good cooperation” is dependent on the perspectives involved and that “cooperation” is a complex, multidimensional concept which is realized in everyday practice *in actu* in very different, albeit not random, but clearly delineable ways. “Cooperation” is therefore also viewed as inherently alterable and thus shapeable.

The challenges formulated below should be understood as initial answers to the following question:

What can an empirical, multidimensional and multiperspective understanding of “cooperation” contribute to the current educational, academic and policy debate on and framing of “cooperation”?

The following points illustrate the demanding task different actors face in shaping the family-ECEC relationship, especially in light of social inequality and the power structures that result. These power structures can be observed among various actors: between educators and parents; ECEC center and family (e.g. Karila, 2006; Kesselhut, 2015); adults and children; members of the social majority and social minorities (e.g. Buchori, & Dobinson, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009); individuals with privileged backgrounds and those with fewer privileges (e.g. Bischoff, Betz, & Eunicke, 2017); and other social groups and institutions. These groups intersect in different ways.

The challenges are meant, above all, for political decision-makers; those in the ECEC support system; ECEC providers; parent representatives; and ECEC centers, including their directors, educators and other staff members.

Since the empirical findings show in many respects how strongly situational and structural contexts determine the options actors in ECEC centers have for taking action and the limitations they face, the challenges focus less on the micro-level of the (not yet) professional activities of individual educators, ECEC teams and directors, and their (deficient) contribution to "cooperation" and the educational partnership. Rather, their activities must be seen as much more dependent on organizational and social conditions: The challenge thus lies precisely in not targeting solely the educator, his/her attitudes, his/her expertise and thus his/her professionalism per se. Educational policy actors and researchers are therefore also being addressed here in a broader sense. Some of the problem-oriented interpretations of the findings thus require further investigation by social scientists in order to generate additional theoretical and empirical insights into the complex interplay of ECEC centers and families and how family-ECEC relations are determined against the background of social inequalities.

#### *Children at the crossroads of opportunities and constraints: challenges*

- Contradictory requirements and goals are present in efforts to realize the educational partnership (Betz, 2015). Seen as ongoing, intensive "cooperation among equals" – as called for in programmatic writings on the subject – educational partnerships are important for some parents, but by no means for all. Moreover, from the educators' viewpoint, the educational partnership is beholden to key prerequisites (such as openness) and is not successful "just like that." As educators and parents see it, however, those parents who meet the requirements envisioned by educators often do not need an educational partnership at all, while those who do not fulfill the requirements need it all the more.

A contradiction is present in the educational partnership and in "cooperation" (i.e. in the relevant ideas, experiences and situational practice), as well as in the programmatic literature: Parents are meant to be seen, and are seen, as equal partners. Having a good relationship with parents is not conditional, but must be seen as valuable "in and of itself." Yet as the analysis shows, parents provide support for the ECEC center, making evident the instrumental nature of educational partnerships and "cooperation": "Cooperation" is valuable when it leads to an expansion of the center's resources. Both of these contradictions and others (see e.g. Betz et al., 2017, p. 126ff.) must be made visible and thus transformable in order to initiate a dialogue and further develop the concept of the educational partnership and "cooperation."

- Educational partnership is primarily understood in the educational discourse as a concept based on trust, respect and appreciation and, thus, one that addresses the relationship level and the necessity of having the proper attitude – something that applies to educators in particular, but also to parents. These premises are necessary but not sufficient for shaping the educational partnership.

Rather, the concept of the educational partnership must be developed and realized within organizations (which are subject to limitations in terms of time and personnel and which use specific logics) and within relationships (which are subject to imbalances between ECEC center and family, for example, or to asymmetries between members of social minorities and the social majority).

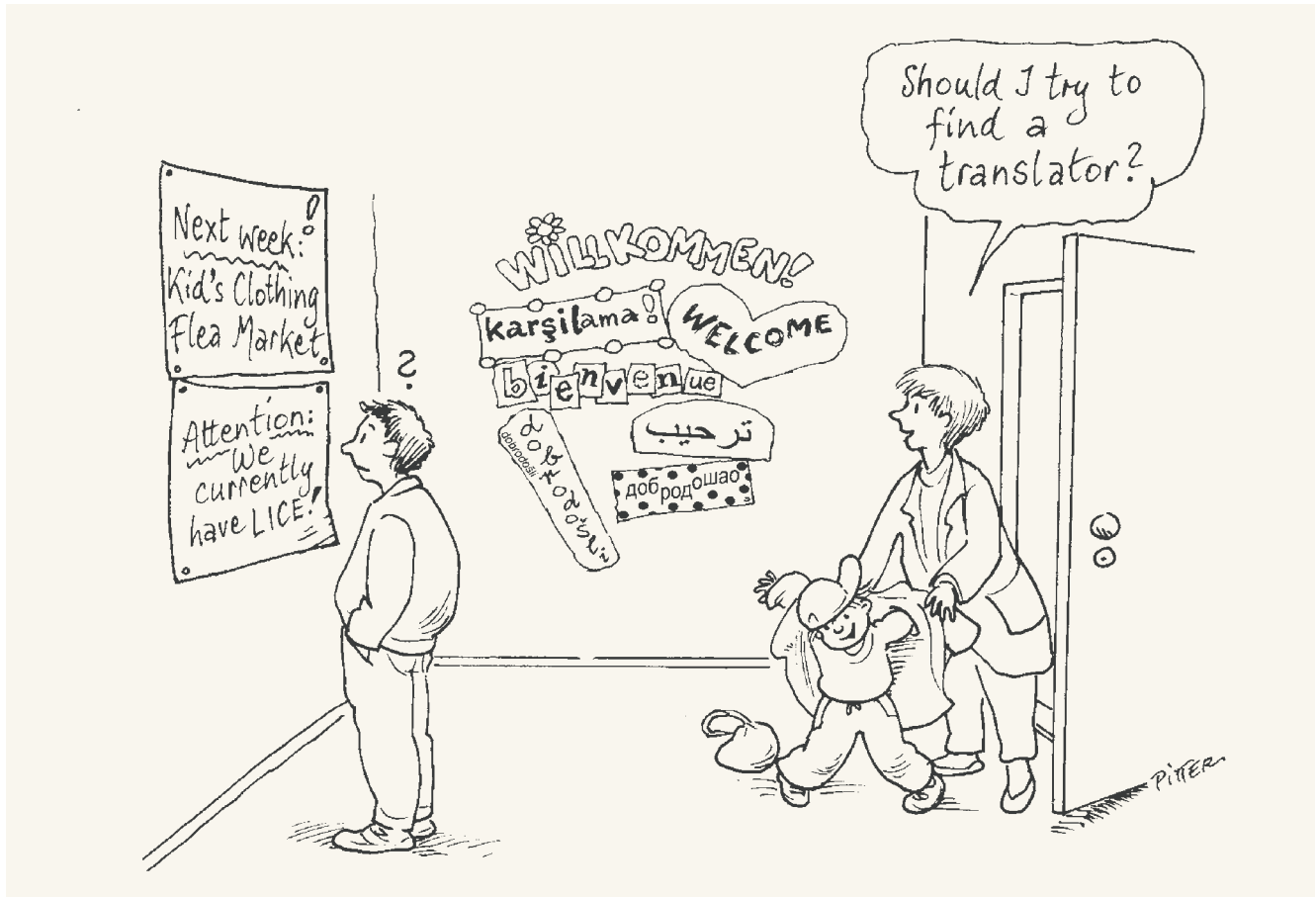
This means that, first, it cannot be unquestioningly assumed that partnerships are possible and will be realized. What is needed instead is reflection on and a more detailed analysis of *how* partnerships between educational professionals and parents are or can be made feasible, and which constraints might thwart them.

Second, pedagogic activities must be seen in terms of having effective organizational structures in place (e.g. Scherr, 2018) instead of merely addressing educators alone (i.e. professionalization), since the tensions and conflicts observed in shaping educational partnerships indicate structural shortcomings of exactly this sort. What is thus required is a marked improvement in the structural conditions needed for coping with the everyday challenges impacting “cooperation” (time, personnel, knowledge and skills, physical premises, etc.). This applies in particular to the educational partnership, which requires a great deal of time for building and maintaining relationships based on trust, respect and appreciation. This is especially significant given the key lines of difference that have been identified, including understanding and speaking the German language. ECEC centers must have access to better resources if the tensions educators face there, especially with non-German-speaking parents, are to be addressed and reduced.

- Policy makers, participants in the educational discourse and those involved in support systems have very high expectations when it comes to the educational partnership, something that is also true of educators at ECEC centers (i.e. their expectations of themselves and parents). At first glance, specialist publications and descriptions of educational partnerships report “the facts,” i.e. that the expectations are presumably justified, and that ambitious social and pedagogic goals (which are sometimes irreconcilable) are ostensibly achievable through educational partnerships (see e.g. Betz, 2018). Yet an empirical-qualitative review and the detailed analysis reveal the degree to which structural, situational and personnel-related aspects are decisive for the success of educational partnerships.

In terms of their expectations, those active in ECEC and in the (educational) policy sphere must give greater consideration to the necessary framework conditions if pedagogic approaches used within family-ECEC “cooperation” are to be further developed into partnership-based approaches. At the same time, empirical studies of the processes, logics and experiences at the micro-level of interactions are precisely what make it possible to provide the expectations – and the prevailing educational and policy programs – with an empirical foundation. More theoretical research is needed here on educational partnerships and “cooperation” between families and ECEC centers, and between families and family-support centers, parental initiatives, and family day care.

- The educational partnership and its necessity can, it seems, hardly be called into question, either among those involved in ECEC or in educational policy circles. A more meaningful approach, however, would be to initiate a discussion of the imperative found in the educational policy sphere, namely to engage in partnerships, since this would make it possible within everyday practice to reflect on the dilemmatic requirements inherent to the concept (symmetry vs. intervention, symmetry vs. compensation, relationships among equals vs. expert-layperson relationships) and, if necessary, to identify and pursue on the provider and ECEC-center levels alternative possibilities for “cooperating” with parents.
- Educational policy writings and academic treatises occasionally maintain, as a matter of course, that congruency and consensus-oriented communication between parents and educators are representative of good “cooperation.” It is therefore important to raise awareness of the fact that it is not uncommon for alliances between parents and educators to (possibly) harbor hidden – and potentially conflictual – asymmetries, to the detriment of parents. It should also be possible to communicate dissent or differences of opinion between educators and parents, since good pedagogical practice permits differing concurrent interpretations (Vandenbroeck, 2009).
- Parents are highly diverse in terms of their ideas, expectations, needs and preferences pertaining to the educational partnership and “cooperation” (see also: Van Laere, Van Houtte, & Vandenbroeck, 2018). Many parents would like support or advice from experts in response to individual events, while others prefer as little “interference” by educators as possible and are more apt to feel patronized. These diverging preferences must be acknowledged. At the same time, this situation requires a center-specific, process-oriented, dialogic procedure for developing approaches (such as the educational partnership) and methods for interacting with each other. Here, too, it must be accepted as legitimate if not all parents want to be involved. Moreover, it is important to reflect on and analyze which parents can and want to participate in these processes and in what way, and which inequality-related effects thereby occur at ECEC centers and more generally in parents’ associations and organizations.
- In discussions of the educational partnership and in everyday practice, the assumption is that all participants are subject to the same preconditions. Parents, however, face unequal structural conditions, something that must be given greater consideration in expectations of “cooperation” and its realization when a range of parents is involved (e.g. German-language skills, life situation, employment). Approaches must therefore be further developed on various levels that can account for unequal conditions in a way that is sensitive to inequalities.



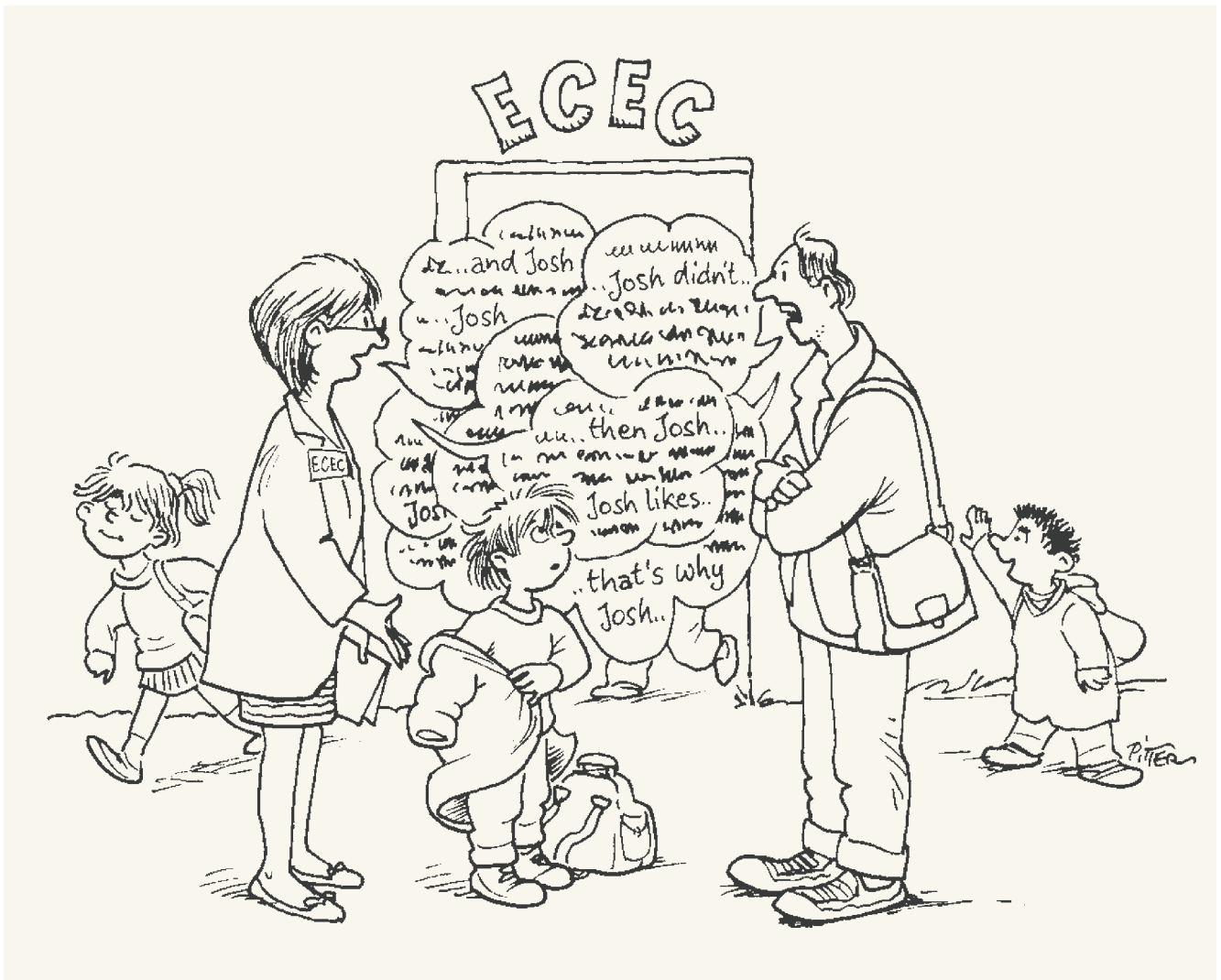
- Clear power structures between ECEC centers and families are evident in the debate about educational partnerships and “cooperation”, in the ideas that parents and educators have on this subject and in the everyday practices found in ECEC centers. The issue here is ultimately that parents are expected to adapt to the ECEC center and that, as the analysis shows, they do adapt. These unequal relationships, which need to be differentiated according to their specific constellations and individual dynamics, must be made transparent in order to transform them.
- In many writings, options for involving parents are framed in very positive terms (through phrasing which encourages greater participation). As parents’ and educators’ viewpoints show, this attitude is too one-sided. Other concerns must also be considered: for example, that (individual) parents, when included to a greater extent, could and do act according to their own interests and in pursuit of (pedagogical) goals that are different from those of educators, other staff members or the facility as a whole. The challenge is thus to establish processes and procedures that facilitate shared decision-making while accounting for the interests of *all* parents. At the same time, the limits of parental involvement must also be identified and reflected upon.

- At the ECEC centers and among the participating actors, explicit and, above all, implicit (institutional) norms are evident, and they must be identified and reflected upon – among other reasons, because norms are what produce deviations from the norms. The challenge here is to (further) develop approaches to dealing with dissent, along with a culture of exchange between the ECEC center and family. At the same time, the participants must be able to express any perceived disagreement with (educational) policy writings and programmatic ideas to develop their own methods on site for shaping their “cooperation” in a way that reflects “the best interests of everyone involved.”
- Multiple languages tend to be spoken by parents at ECEC centers, although the centers’ pedagogic practices generally occur within a framework of monolingual language norms. An inequality-sensitive approach to dealing with this dilemma, which is faced by educators and parents alike, should be developed on various levels (education and training, organizational development, provider structures, policy steering).
- Reductionist and thus unrealistic ideas are widespread, e.g. that “cooperation” and the educational partnership can be used to overcome social problems such as social inequalities or, conversely, that “cooperation” and partnership do not have an impact, or they are not yet doing so but will in the future. These ideas, which have found their way into programmatic writings and, to some extent, scientific literature, must be revised and awareness raised of the fact that differences and inequalities can and do increase *through, during* and *despite* “cooperation,” as the analysis shows. Here, too, further research is required.
- In many educational policy publications and academic treatises, close and trusting “cooperation” in the form of the educational partnership between educators and parents is framed in exclusively positive terms, among other reasons because it promotes the child’s well-being. At the same time, policy documents (such as the federal state of Hesse’s educational plan) maintain that children and adults can be equal partners. Closer examination of these generally accepted truths is needed, since parents and educators can and do ally themselves against children, for example – as the analysis shows – by overriding preferences clearly articulated by children. At the same time, it is necessary to be sensitive to the fact that children can and do use adults within family-ECEC “cooperation” as resources, and that they themselves are also used by adults as resources (for carrying out errands or relaying information). Thus, the assertion that “cooperation” is always “in the child’s best interest” is not always correct; rather, it *can be* in light of the circumstances or situation.
- There are many generational power structures within family-ECEC “cooperation” that are detrimental to children. In the educational discourse, in policy documents and in academic treatises, the idea is widely present that educators and parents (alone) are the natural actors participating in and shaping the “cooperation” between ECEC center and family, and that children are not direct participants. Not infrequently, parents and educators subscribe to this idea as well. More must therefore be done to raise awareness of these generational power structures and to identify in detail the contributions made by children to shaping family-ECEC relations. After all, their contributions are many and varied, as the findings show.



- A paradox is revealed by the observations of everyday activities at the ECEC centers and the conversations with parents and educators. On the one hand, many prerequisites and caveats are raised as to why (certain) children cannot, as a rule, be included in parent-educator conferences (for example, because they are too young). Similarly, other less fundamental but more situational reasons are mentioned, both in favor of and against the inclusion of children. On the other hand, numerous more or less incidental situations were observed in which a parent and an educator or educators entered into an exchange with each other (e.g. during drop-off or pick-up times), something that (often) happened with the child's involvement or while the child or multiple children were present. In such cases, children are "participating non-participants," as it were.





- The challenges thus lie, *first*, in explicitly recognizing this “incidental” involvement as the child’s contribution to “cooperation” – even if the child is primarily the object of the negotiating process between adults and only included to a limited extent in the latter’s communication. *Second*, the child’s presence – for example while he/she is being picked up from the ECEC center – should be framed as potential involvement, thus making it possible to decide situationally on his/her participation or non-participation. This would allow the child, based on the case or situation, to be shifted from the position generally observed in the study, i.e. as an object of the communication or exchange, to a more participatory position.

*Third*, some of the situations observed in which both “fitting” and divergent ideas about the child (e.g. proper clothing, how and when children should be picked up) were negotiated by adults can also be negotiated with children and not only as if they were not present at all.

In sum, children’s contributions to “cooperation” (e.g. children recount their experiences, make connections, relay messages, serve as a topic of conversation and opportunity to educate parents) must be addressed by and with all participants – parents, educators, children – in order to shed light on how children’s (non-)participation is dealt with and, if necessary, to initiate change.

- Finally, the generally accepted truth must be re-examined that children are always or per se at the center of “cooperation” and that all that matters is the child and the child’s well-being, upbringing and education – as is often maintained in pedagogical and policy writings. It is clear, however, from the comments expressed and observations made during the study that “cooperation” also involves, *first*, adults’ legitimate interests (e.g. parental job situations, friendships) and that the focus is on the adults during their communication – something that can indeed represent legitimate (pedagogical) activity.

*Second*, the analysis shows how “cooperation” is determined by organizational issues at the ECEC center (e.g. helping out at the center, expanding the range of activities, picking children up earlier). The focus is on what is required for organizational processes, routines and activities and not necessarily on child-rearing, education and the children’s well-being. This finding demonstrates that a significant discrepancy can exist between programmatics and reality and that this discrepancy *is also* a key aspect of “cooperation” (Viernickel, Nentwig-Gesemann, Nicolai, Schwarz, & Zenker, 2013).

*Third*, the findings show that ECEC centers are “not only *places for children*” (Honig, 2002, p. 5, emphasis in the original) that – if one accepts the views of some educators – should simultaneously be seen as “better places for children” compared to the family. After all, ECEC centers are also “*societal places, social spaces*” (ibid., emphasis in the original). This is made evident by two inequality-relevant points in the analysis: On the one hand, certain parents are addressed by educators as needing instruction, demonstrating a significant asymmetry between the ECEC center and parent(s), whereas parents ascribed non-native status are primarily addressed here – an asymmetry that can be observed elsewhere in society as well. On the other hand, ECEC centers are societal places, in that educators avail themselves of widely used social categorizations such as “migration background” and refer to parents ascribed a non-native background as “others” deviating from the norm. Classifying parents as “socially vulnerable” and “unfamiliar with education” references designations of deficiency commonly found elsewhere and updates them in the ECEC context.

These classifications – empirically illustrated here by the example of educators – reveal the ECEC centers’ sociopolitical significance, in addition to their importance for educational policy, an importance emphasized by policy and educational actors and underscored in the context of educational partnerships. Thus, the centers’ various functions become evident and, with them, those of

“cooperation” – functions that extend far beyond the realm of education. If these classifications and the centers’ various functions (which are not always congruent, but can contradict each other) are to be examined more closely, better framework conditions are needed at ECEC centers and in support systems for “cooperating” with parents, e.g. more time and educational resources. These framework conditions are important if participants are to gain an awareness of the prevailing classifications, if they are to see themselves as part of unequal relationships, and if approaches to inequality-sensitive communication, interaction and organizational development are to be advanced on all the requisite levels.

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