

Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Constraints

The relationship between school and family
from the children's viewpoint:
their perspectives, their positions

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

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Foreword

What do primary-school students have to say about formal meetings between parents and teachers? How do they feel about more informal exchanges? What do children think of these interactions and which role do they themselves adopt? Those are the questions addressed by the second research report *Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Constraints*,¹ authored by Tanja Betz of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and her team as part of a project jointly carried out with the Bertelsmann Stiftung. The report focuses on children – actors previously neglected in the academic and policy debates – by investigating their feelings about what makes a “good” educational partnership between families and schools.

During group discussions and individual interviews, the researchers spoke with students in the third and fourth grades at five mainstream primary schools in the states of Hesse and Rhineland–Palatinate. Their goal was to learn more about how the family–school relationship is shaped. As the findings clearly show: Children have more than just *one* perspective and are not a homogenous group – the same way parents and educational professionals are not. Some want to be informed and involved when their parents interact with teachers or others at school. As they see it, they benefit from a close connection between their family and school. They are pleased when their mother or father comes to school and they themselves can have a say – for example, during parent–teacher–student conferences. The findings suggest, however, that this applies more to children from socially advantaged families.

Other children, in contrast, attempt to keep the worlds of family and school as separate as possible. One child explained that in his free time he is “a different person than at school” and that this “free-time me” or “at-home me” should remain unknown at school as much as possible. Some children, however, do not succeed in controlling the flow of information between their parents and school on topics they consider “private.” Parents divulge “secrets” instead, or parents and teachers exchange photographs against the child’s will. As a result, these children try to avoid situations where their parents and teachers meet, which they perceive as unpleasant and threatening. In some cases, such meetings are even a source of fear. Other children, however, unquestioningly accept parent–teacher meetings and the role they themselves are assigned. Yet in these situations they sometimes feel incapacitated and powerless.

From the perspective of many children, an educational partnership is therefore not seen as ideal, when all participants – teachers, parents, students – come together as equals, work closely together and discuss all manner of topics. The findings

1 The first research report published as part of this cooperative project examined the relationship between families and centers providing early childhood education and care (ECEC), shedding light, above all, on the perspective of parents and educational professionals. The report is available at www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/chancen-barrieren-kita.

point to a range of ambivalent feelings instead. Children, moreover, are not the only ones who feel ambivalent, as other studies and publications have shown, including those released as part of this research project. Teachers, too, struggle to fulfill their role as school representatives – i.e. to teach, evaluate and, especially in the German context, recommend the best type of secondary school – while also interacting with parents and children as trusting, equal partners. Like children, parents exhibit considerable diversity in terms of how much they want to – or can – get involved in educational institutions.

Against this background, we feel it is crucial to take a second look at the idealized concept of educational partnerships – an ideal very present in the educational and policy fields in many countries – and to consider it from a much broader viewpoint. We want to use this study to stimulate discussion about alternative forms, possibilities and goals when it comes to cooperation between parents, teachers and children. All levels – schools, educational administrators and policymakers – should develop and test a variety of cooperative methods. Moreover, they should do more to involve children in shaping the family-school relationship. To that end, student representatives should be systematically queried and included right from the start. Another key aspect is that the ambivalent feelings outlined above need to be acknowledged and considered. So, too, should the power structures and inequalities among adults and children, parents and educational professionals, and families from different social backgrounds. Ultimately, that is the only way to pinpoint and address the limits and risks of cooperation in its various forms, especially as it pertains to the educational opportunities and constraints certain children face.

This is an important, challenging task which everyone involved must address. It can only be successfully undertaken if the necessary framework conditions are discussed – i.e. the time, personnel, training and settings required for effectively shaping the family-school relationship – and if adequate resources are made available.

We look forward to a lively debate and to hearing your thoughts on this issue.



Dr. Jörg Dräger
Executive Board Member
Bertelsmann Stiftung



Anette Stein
Program Director
Effective Investments in Education

1 The study: background, research questions, goals

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 educational professionals, parents and children – on the “partnership” between early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers and schools, on the one hand, and families, on the other. The present research report thus offers a synopsis of the relevant findings.² Nationally and internationally, considerable significance is ascribed in the educational and policy context to the shaping of the lifeworlds of children, as referenced by the term “educational partnership”. The study’s objective is to consider more closely the perspectives of children, a group previously neglected both in academic research and on the educational policy level (see e.g. Betz 2015; Betz et al. 2017).

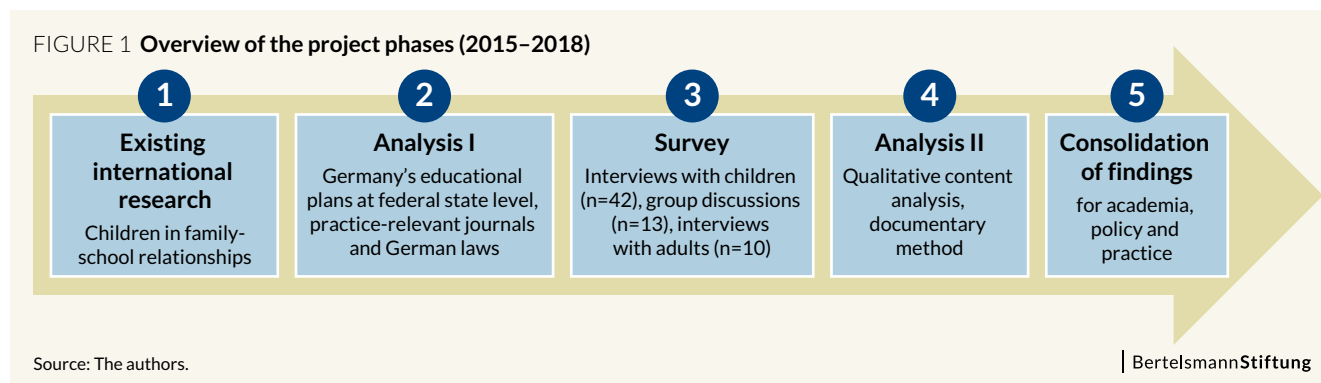
The study addresses the following research questions, which focus on *children’s perspectives* of the family–school relationship, their *positions* “in between” the other actors, and their *self-positionings*:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which viewpoints do children have about shaping family-school relations in general?
- Which viewpoints do they have about specific forms of contact such as parents’ evenings or meetings involving parents, teachers and children?
- What have they experienced in terms of contact between family and school?
- Which position is ascribed to children when parents and teachers have contact with each other? Which self-positionings become evident in such situations?
- What have children experienced within the family-school relationship, and what guides the actions they take within this relationship from their position as children?
- To what extent can their experiences and the objectives of their actions be systematically differentiated within the cohort of children, e.g. by gender or social position?

² This publication is a summary of the study’s second research report. The first report empirically examined the partnership between families and ECEC centers and appeared in German as *Kinder zwischen Chancen und Barrieren. Zusammenarbeit zwischen Kita und Familie: Perspektiven und Herausforderungen*. It is available in full and abridged versions through the following link and DOI: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/chancen-barrieren-kita and DOI 10.11586/2019043. A summary of the report is available in English at: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/opportunities-constraints-ecec

To answer these questions, a qualitative approach was chosen that was also deployed throughout the individual project phases:



(1) and (2): The first step in this process was to examine current national and international research, along with the relevant theoretical foundations. The goal was to assemble basic systematic knowledge and knowledge from the fields of education and the social sciences on the perspectives and positions of children in family–school relations, thus enabling a review and analysis of the discourse relating to the educational partnership on multiple levels (Analysis 1). To that end, the educational plans for ECEC centers and schools published by Germany’s federal states were empirically examined, as were the relevant German journals addressing educational practice in schools, and any pertinent legal provisions (16 education acts) (see Betz et al. 2017; Betz & Eunicke 2017; Kayser & Eunicke 2016).

(3) and (4): Following these initial analyses, the data collection activities that make up the core of this research report (i.e. individual interviews and group discussions with primary–school children) were prepared and conducted. Prior to this, ethical aspects of the data collection and evaluation processes were reviewed and approved by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* (German Educational Research Association). All participants – adults and children, and the children’s parents or guardians – were given detailed information about the study’s purpose and objectives, ensuring they were in a position to provide informed consent (Christensen & Prout 2002; Mayall 2009; Punch 2002). In particular, attention was drawn to the fact that participation in the study was voluntary and that there would be no adverse consequences if a child or adult who was asked to take part decided not to do so (Cameron 2005; Harcourt & Sargeant 2011) – especially within the school–context (Bonnell et al. 2018; Felzmann 2009). Both the statements made during the interviews and the resulting findings are being presented only in anonymized form to ensure individual persons cannot be identified based on their input. In the methodological assumptions and the presentation of the results, statements made by the children have been generalized to arrive at “typical” perspectives; the focus is not on individual children. Participants were informed in advance of this aspect as well. Qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2016; Kuckartz & Rädiker 2019) and the documentary method (Bohnsack et al. 2010; Bohnsack 2018) were used to evaluate the collected data.

(5): The project concluded with a consolidation of the findings, ensuring they will be available to researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

2 Research design, sampling and methodology

Based on a Childhood Studies approach as the theoretical basis for the whole study (more details in: Betz et al. 2019, p. 16ff.) and with a special focus on concepts like *children as actors* and the *generational order* (e.g. Esser et al. 2016), data were collected at five mainstream primary schools (third and fourth grades) in two German states, Hesse and Rhineland–Palatinate. In order to include diverse and contrasting experiential spaces, primary schools were selected that are located in both (inner-)urban and rural settings and in socially homogeneous areas home to either more disadvantaged or more privileged populations. The study was initially presented at the parents' evenings held for the classes in question (with some sections having been previously presented at school council meetings). Following that, the goals, methods, ethical considerations and privacy protection measures were discussed with the children in the participating classes. To make the study's objective easier to understand, the children were allowed to attach their ideas about what the family–school relationship should look like to a large poster and discuss them as a group. Written consent forms were distributed to all the children to give to their parents. The children themselves were asked for their own consent during a second face-to-face meeting prior to the group discussions (*informed consent*).

Data were collected from July 2016 to November 2017. The following provides an overview of the sample's main characteristics:

- Primary schools: 5 (in the states of Hesse and Rhineland–Palatinate)
- Classes: 6 (grades 3 and 4; the average age of children interviewed was 8–9 years)
- Group discussions: 13 (involving a total of 54 children)
- Individual in-depth interviews: 42 (23 girls and 19 boys)
- Interviews with six teachers, one principal and two school social workers, and a group discussion with mothers of primary-school students, which took place in a parents' café at the school

Since the presentation of the findings focuses on the empirical results of the group discussions and the individual interviews with the children, these methods and the corresponding evaluation procedures are discussed in more detail below.

Group discussions as expert roundtables with primary-school students

Group discussions are common practice (Morgan et al. 2002; Punch & Graham 2016) even beyond social-scientific research on childhood and youth in the German-speaking world (for Germany see e.g. Bock 2010; Gröhlich & Wagner-Willi 2010; Kämpfe 2019; Nentwig-Gesemann 2002; Pfaff 2010). Discussions in groups offer the potential to reconstruct children's *common or conjunctive experiential space* (Bohnsack 2015; Przyborski 2004) as mirrored in the situation at hand. This space can be seen, for example, when groups of individuals seemingly understand what is being discussed, even though the discussion at first remains unclear to outsiders. One possible scenario here is a group of school students sitting together talking about what happened during a break. The children add to what the others are saying, and sentences need not be completed before the children *know* what another member of the group will communicate: "Man **erklärt** sich nichts, sondern **versteht** einander." ("You don't **explain** to each other, but **understand** one another" Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, p. 288, emphasis in original). Analysis of group discussions involving adults has also shown that such collective knowledge can be found in other groups beyond those comprised of friends, for example in other social units such as groups of colleagues. Applying these methodological considerations to the present study, the children interviewed share an conjunctive experiential space specific to their school class, and/or experiences typical to their gender, age or educational background, which can overlap.

The objective of the group discussion as a methodological process is not to concentrate on individuals, be they children or adults, but to explore the collective and/or conjunctive experiential space as articulated by the group (Przyborski 2017). This methodological foundation thus permits a focus on child-specific collective knowledge (and its interactions with other conjunctive experiential spaces): Which experiential spaces do children share with each other when it comes to shaping family-school relations?

Attention was paid during the study to querying groups made up of participants who had already constituted actual groups (e.g. classmates who were friends at school) prior to the data being collected (Heinzel 2012, p. 105). The groups of children were also approached as "expert roundtables," since only *they* were able to describe specific experiences as children at the intersection of family and primary school. The groups were given as much freedom as possible to discuss the topic as they chose and as the situation warranted. The discussion was initiated in the following manner: "We adults really have no idea what you do and what you experience when your families³ interact with people from school,⁴ such as your teacher. Think for a minute: What happens in that situation? What do you do? What do they do? How is that for you?" Follow-up questions were subsequently posed based on the specific topics that came up in the group in order to elicit more detailed descriptions and observations (e.g. "You talked about the class party. Could you say a bit more about that?"). At the end of the discussion, the children filled out a

3 The term "family" was used in the questions posed for the present study. The children usually spoke about parents and mothers, less often about fathers. They also referred to brothers and sisters, and grandparents. The actual terms used are presented in the empirical analysis.

4 To give the children the freedom to express themselves, the term "people from school" was used. After this led to confusion in the initial group discussions, the children's teacher was offered as an example, since that was the person they referred to most often.

brief questionnaire on their family's sociodemographic background and received a certificate of participation as a thank-you.

Each discussion was led by a researcher from the project team and minutes were kept by an assistant. The group discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes on average. The audio recordings of the discussions were used to develop specific follow-up questions for the individual interviews with the children, which took place at a later point in time.

Documentary interpretation of the group discussions

The group discussions were interpreted using the documentary method developed by Ralf Bohnsack based on theoretical principles advanced by Karl Mannheim (1964; 1980) and following critical engagement with the theories advanced by Harold Garfinkel (1967) (for details on the metatheoretical underpinnings, see Bohnsack 2010a, 2010b, 2018). The documentary method juxtaposes the actors' patterns of practice with the habituated knowledge they use for guidance. The method thus provides reconstructive access to the collective knowledge found among various social groups (Bohnsack et al. 2010). The method focuses on reconstructing principles that guide actions, i.e. not only what is expressed verbally, but also the implicit meanings underlying what is expressed. In particular, a focus is put on how a statement develops from one remark to the next, how it builds on other such remarks or systematically incorporates other statements and thus becomes a uniform group perspective.

The analysis began by compiling an overview of the topics occurring in the interviews in order to identify important (meaningful) moments in the group discussions (thematic progression). The substance of what was said was summarized by the authors (formulating interpretation). The passages from the interviews were then evaluated in terms of what they document, with a focus on reconstructing the frames of reference within which the interviewees act (reflective interpretation). The goal of the interpretation is a sense-genetic typification, i.e. identifying what was "typical" in the individual group discussions, and a socio-genetic typification, through which the social genesis of the reconstructed types is interpreted. Data from questionnaires filled out by the children were also used for the socio-genetic typification, as was input from the interviews with adults. An essential aspect of these steps is that a contrastive approach was taken from the start (for a detailed description of the individual methodological steps, see e.g. Bohnsack 2010b; Bohnsack et al. 2010).

Narrative, guided expert interviews with children

In order to include children's individual experiences, a total of 42 qualitative in-depth guided interviews were also conducted with children, in addition to the group discussions (Brooker 2007; Fuhs & Schneider 2012; Punch & Graham 2016). The objective of this interviewing method was to access the children's expert knowledge (Tangen 2008) and their experiences of how family-school relations are shaped.

The interviews began with questions or statements meant to generate a response, such as "Tell me a bit about yourself" or "What is a completely normal day in

your life like?”. Following that, guidelines were used to direct the interview and examine the following areas, which address various aspects of the family-school relationship:

- Questions about the narrative pertaining to school and family (e.g. “Do you or does someone else at school talk about your family and what you do at home? Tell me a bit about that.”)
- Questions about (face-to-face) contact between family and teachers (e.g. “They have probably met in person, haven’t they? Could you tell me about the last time that happened and how it was?”)
- Questions about specific forms of contact (e.g. “Tell me about how the WhatsApp group for your class works. Could you give me an example?”)
- Follow-up questions about the group discussions (e.g. “You said that you are more the TV type at home. Can you share a bit more about what you meant by that?”)
- Follow-up questions about opinions and preferences (e.g. “What do you think it should be like when they interact with each other?”)

Analysis of individual interviews with children

The individual interviews with children were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2016; Kuckartz & Rädiker 2019; Mayring 2015). This method makes a large number of statements clear and comprehensible with regard to the main topics and to new, previously unknown topics which become apparent during the evaluation process. The subject of analysis and thus the overarching classification was the various forms the relationship between family and elementary school takes from the children’s perspective(s) in light of the position(s) they are ascribed in this relationship and their self-positionings.

The first categories were created using a process of induction, then further developed over the course of the analysis. The focus was on identifying certain characteristics of interest and then systematizing them. In a second step, a code tree was assembled which was then reviewed, expanded and corrected repeatedly in light of team meetings and revisions made while the team coded the material (for more on the process, see Kuckartz 2016, p. 24ff.). During the coding, new subcodes were generated as they became evident, and the corresponding passages in the interviews were assigned to existing subcodes. Longer sections of the interviews were coded, i.e. entire segments as opposed to individual words or sentences. Codes were assigned across all transcripts and, thus, across all the children surveyed. The team subsequently used a process of abstraction to develop the subcodes derived from the material into more general, overarching codes.

Using a hermeneutic approach, it was then possible to identify the positions, judgments and viewpoints which had become visible in the children’s statements and which informed what had been explicitly said. The interpretations thus reflect a deeper, more implicit level of understanding, i.e. the latent meaning.

The following begins with an overview of the findings from the empirical analysis. Challenges are then identified which can arise when shaping the relationship between family and primary school – especially in view of social asymmetries and the power structures that result between parents and teachers and between adults and children. Ultimately, these unequal relationships can have an impact on children’s educational achievement. The challenges addressed include the framework conditions and resources required for shaping the “partnership” between children, parents and teachers in a way that is sensitive to inequalities. The need for further research is also noted.

3 Findings from the empirical analysis

Relevant forms of contact between family and primary school

In a first step, the different forms of contact between the families and primary schools were identified from the children's perspectives. These can include class parties and school events; meetings involving the parents, teacher and child; parents' evenings; letters and other written communications; school visiting days for parents; telephone calls; visits to the student's home by the teacher; chance meetings outside of school (e.g. in the supermarket or sauna); school field trips in which parents also participate.

Class parties, school events, parent-teacher-child meetings and parents' evenings are the most common forms of contact between families and primary schools mentioned during the individual interviews with the students. The study further differentiates between the children's attitudes towards parents' evenings and parent-teacher-child meetings and the experiences they have had with these forms of contact.

Parents' evening as a positive experience

The children mostly speak very positively about parents' evenings, stressing the usefulness of these meetings, since they allow a discussion of organizational details, especially upcoming class trips. For the children, parents' evenings seem to provide them, even when they are not present, with access to organizational information they consider important. For example, the meetings allow them and their parents to find out more about excursions, class trips, etc. At the same time, parents' evenings are, quite naturally for children, "simply part of school". The few negative responses about parents' evenings have to do with personal matters, such as parents revealing information about family behavior or events at home, to the displeasure of the children themselves.

In addition to this positive assessment of parents' evenings, it became clear during the interviews that some children have only a vague idea, or none at all, about what is negotiated here. Parents' evenings thus remain a mystery for many children. While some children say they know that parents' evenings take place, they also admit they do not know exactly what the purpose of these events is.

Access to knowledge about parents' evenings and participation in them is primarily the responsibility of mothers and fathers

Children refer to their mothers and fathers – in their role as potential sources of information – as the reason they do not know (or do know) about parents' evenings. Parents tell children about what transpired at the most recent meeting – or they don't. From the children's viewpoint, parents are thus gatekeepers when it comes to what occurs at parents' evenings and any agreements made there. They are the ones who decide whether to inform children about the evenings and the topics under discussion – or whether they will keep the information to themselves. Children do not see themselves or their teachers in this position. That the responsibility for having access to knowledge about parents' evenings and for participating in them lies – as children perceive it – primarily with parents can also be seen in the way children talk about the structural challenges that affect parents' participation in the meetings.

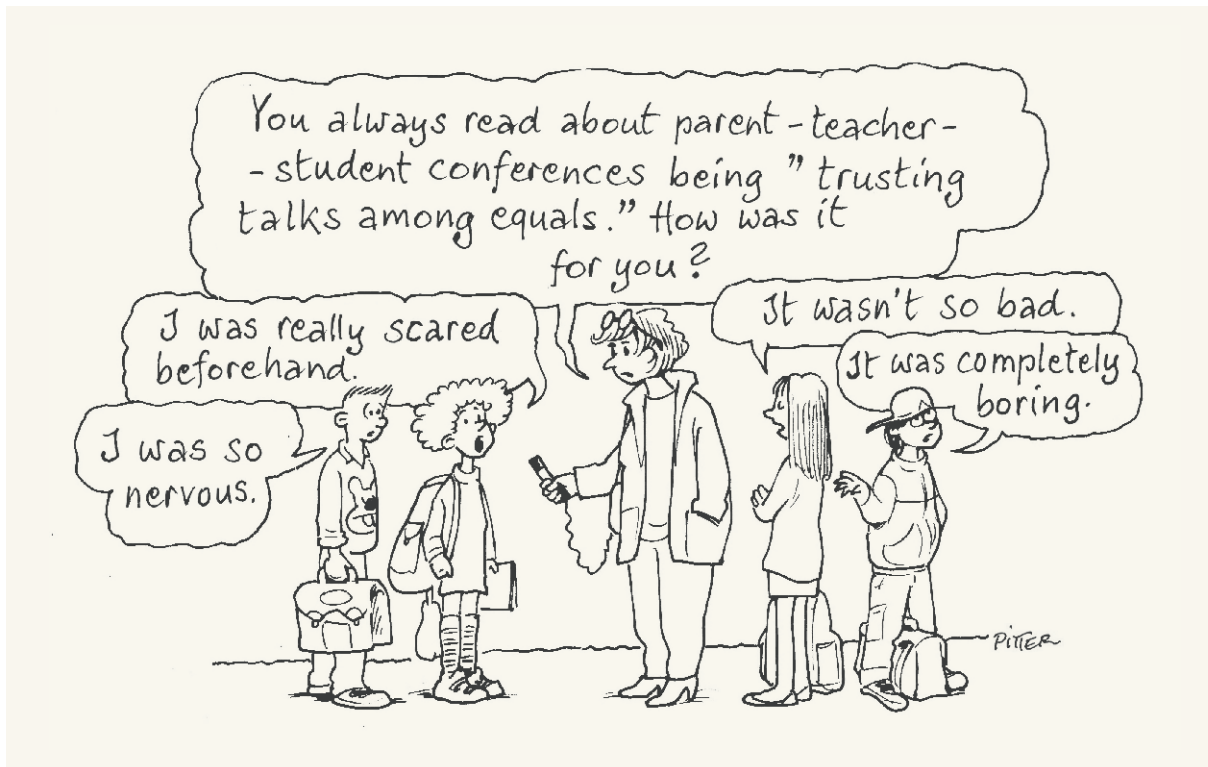
Children say that it can be difficult or even impossible for their mother or father to attend evening meetings of this sort, since the latter must work or arrange for someone to look after the child in question and any siblings. According to the children interviewed, depending on which family members are available and the current family situation, there are a number of reasons why parents cannot participate in the evenings or why it is difficult for them to do so. Such barriers must be overcome by the family, for example by involving grandparents or other relatives.

Parent-teacher-child conferences: between excitement and disappointment

Most of the children interviewed had attended a parent-teacher-student (or "three-way") conference (i.e. a meeting involving only the child in question, his parent or parents, and his teacher) and discussed them at length. These are "high-energy events" for children, who describe being nervous and excited beforehand, in some cases even being afraid. In general, the children are curious about what lies in store for them. When such events do take place, the excitement subsides and is replaced by a sense of relief that the meeting was less of a threat than previously feared. The interviews also showed that children experience disappointment about the ultimate purpose of the conferences, which were sometimes even described as "boring."

Children as objects of evaluation, and their performance at school as the subject of three-way conferences

Almost all children in the sample said that the conferences are usually about themselves or a specific aspect pertaining to them: their performance as a student and the need to improve it. The topic of discussion is the child in question as a learner who is being assessed. The children receive suggestions and instructions about the improvements they can make, especially regarding their grades and the work they do in school. At the same time, children can and should make suggestions about how these improvements can be achieved. The teacher asks the children questions, notes where improvements are needed or possible, and requests that they be made in the future. From the children's perspective, mothers and fathers are primarily observers here. The children thus depict the parent-teacher-child conferences as a typical school-related situation pertaining to achievement, albeit one limited to a small number of participants (when classmates and peers are not in the room) that is special by virtue of it taking place while observers (parents) are present.



Children's self-positionings during family-school interactions

There is a wide variety of ways in which children position themselves when contact occurs between family and school. Some adopt the position of being the subject of communication between adults, some position themselves as powerless and excluded, some as listeners, some as individuals who are reading along, well-informed, (dis-)interested, gatekeepers or contributors. The possibilities extend all the way to children who situate themselves as discussion participants in the position of "children," as educational improvement projects and as beneficiaries.

These self-positionings are described by children, but not immediately judged to be "good" or "bad." Thus, a simple classification is not possible which distinguishes between, for example, a self-positioning as being excluded from the communication and a negative judgment, and, conversely, a self-positioning as a participant in the discussion in the position of "the child" – e.g. as described in the case of three-way meetings – which children tend to view positively. Overall, there are only a few clear correlations between judgments and self-positionings, such as the self-positioning as informed and a beneficiary, which is generally seen as positive, and the self-positioning as powerless, which generally has a negative connotation.

The self-positioning as powerless is often connected to the fact that children can be described as bypassed gatekeepers. As the findings make clear, children in such situations no longer control the flow of information between the two systems of family and school. Information, photos and stories are exchanged between parents and teachers – and the children themselves have no possibility of preventing it. This can be interpreted as follows: Children are *ascribed a key role in interinstitutional communications* between family and school, yet it is a role that can be precarious,

i.e. it can be and is undermined in many ways, for example when parents “blab” personal or intimate topics or when teachers forward pictures to parents without the child’s consent.



Finally, the self-positionings as gatekeeper are also significant in that children position themselves as the ones who mediate between family and school, or they take on the assignment of mediating, or prohibit or thwart it. At the same time, this highlights the *key position adults have in interinstitutional communication*: Children need adults if they are to gain access to knowledge, certain situations, etc. In some cases, this access is withheld; in some cases, it ensues primarily via parents, as gatekeepers. The possibilities children have for gaining access to knowledge, experience, etc., on their own are limited.

Collective orientations

In terms of their involvement in shaping the relationship between family and primary school *as children*, the children’s main collective orientations are classified below as three types based on three dimensions, types to which it was possible to assign the groups of children participating in the group discussions. The dimensions show that children have a range of experiences shaping the family-school relationship, and the degree to which those experiences differ; they also show that children have contrary orientations for taking action in this context.

Type 1: Inclusion and being informed – orientation towards involvement

Dimension 1: Being a child / being an adult

The narratives told by this first type relating to shaping the family-school relationship reveal that these children are oriented towards a similarity between adults and children. The children emphasize numerous similarities to adults – especially to mothers and parents. Children and adults, in the logic of this orientation, do not have fundamentally different experiences at the intersection of family and primary school. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that parents are ascribed interests in school matters which resemble those of the children themselves. This orientation towards being closely connected is fundamental and can be seen in the following two dimensions, such as when children depict their parents as being responsible for helping them with their homework.



Dimension 2: Participation – inclusion/information

Type 1 groups see themselves as being very much included in the flow of information between family and school. Instead of referring to their own lack of knowledge, for example, when it comes to what happens at a parents' evenings, they say they are told "everything". The *orientation towards being informed* can be seen in the fact that these groups describe their knowledge of the events taking place during parent-teacher meetings and information about these meetings – even if they themselves were not present. It also becomes clear in their passing along information to their families or schools (e.g. when they inform their parents and are subsequently asked by their parents what happened at school).

Dimension 3: Proximity/distance between family and school

Type 1 groups are oriented towards *the proximity of their families to school*. The parents' physical presence – especially the mother – at school is seen as positive, as is the all-encompassing information families have about school-related matters. For example, these children say it makes them “happy” when family members come to school. They also view the chances of realizing this orientation as favorable; this is evident in the fact that they can describe various types of contact and that they see themselves as the beneficiaries of these situations. Among the advantages they perceive is that others think of them when it comes to school-related matters, e.g. when a child's mother reminds her to do her homework. This salient position within the flow of information between family and school can, however, result in a child's being given additional work. Yet the proximity of family and school makes it possible for these children to delegate to their parents tasks considered onerous.

Type 2: Withdrawal and separation – orientation towards setting boundaries***Dimension 1: Being a child / being an adult***

Unlike Type 1, which is oriented towards involvement, not much that is “good” results for Type 2 groups when teachers and family members meet. These encounters pose risks instead.

This collective *orientation towards threatening, powerful adults* shaping the family-school relationship becomes evident in the fact that when these adults meet, it can spell trouble for Type 2 children. Things come to light and shameful/embarrassing moments ensue, especially when one is “alone” with the teacher. The guiding principle is thus: “When there's a meeting with the teacher, you have escape.” From the experiences described, it is clear that groups with this orientation feel judged by adults. Thus, they see *teachers as the individuals whose interpretations are considered valid*. A key factor here is the children's desire to escape situations that make them uncomfortable (and in which they feel judged) and separate themselves from adults by setting boundaries, i.e. doing “their own thing”. This is diametrically opposed to the Type 1 orientation.

Dimension 2: Participation – inclusion/information

The modes in which these groups of children respond focus on escaping meetings between adults in the family-school context that are considered threatening or powerful (*orientation towards escape*): If they cannot simply leave the room and remove themselves from the situation, then they fall asleep or start drawing. Hiding and running away are also proven responses. These children describe the end of such meetings in particularly positive terms. Thus, they are not oriented towards being informed, even if they clearly articulate that they want to know what is said about them. This, however, is negotiated as furtive curiosity; the children know that they are the subject of discussion when their parents and teacher meet. They are therefore unable to escape such situations completely, since they themselves and their performance as students are the topic at hand.

Dimension 3: Proximity/distance between family and school

The analysis shows that groups of this type are *oriented towards separating family and school*. Having both systems in close proximity to each other is an adverse situation for these children, e.g. the idea that parents should be present in the classroom. Distance between the systems is, in contrast, negotiated as positive, since feelings of homesickness could otherwise arise during class trips, for example, and since family members should not know everything that happens at school and vice versa. Among other topics, the focus group participants spoke of the possibility that parents could learn about negative behavior at school or that their “at-home me” could be discovered by teachers.

The type oriented towards separation thus strives to create and maintain distance between family and school. These groups use a range of methods – e.g. hiding under the bed when their teacher is due to visit the family at home, or reading a book or drawing during parent–teacher–student conferences and only speaking when they are asked a question. They also describe subtle practices, not only to absent themselves, but also to gain access to parent–teacher interactions, for example by eavesdropping or “spying.”

Type 3: Powerlessness and acceptance – orientation towards adaptation

Dimension 1: Being a child / being an adult

Type 3 groups are *oriented towards the power that adults have to shape the relationship between family and primary school*. “Have to,” “can” and “allowed to” are characteristic expressions for this type in particular, since they point to this cohort’s possibilities and necessities. The powerful position teachers have and the natural distinction made in the group discussions between matters concerning adults and those concerning children represent an inviolable boundary for these children in terms of the actions they can take (“My mother doesn’t tell me anything about it [parents’ evening], it’s a secret”). The conditions “are just the way things are”; meetings between parents and teachers are random events that “just happen”. This does not mean that adults are seen as threatening or that meetings between teachers and parents are events to be escaped, or that the need for separation is present (Type 2). The *orientation towards a strong division* between matters concerning adults and matters concerning children also stands in clear contrast to Type 1.

Dimension 2: Participation – inclusion/information

Characteristic of this type is an *orientation towards being informed*. These groups try to obtain information from adults that is relevant to them, similar to Type 2. The key difference, however, is in the boundary they experience in taking action: For Type 3, the power to act (in particular, possibilities for communicating information and for being included in shaping the family–school relationship) lies *solely* with the adults – since it “just is” their business. Being included in meetings between parents and teachers is outside the remit of Type 3 children; they speak instead about their own *powerlessness* to act (“They never say anything about it”). While Type 2 children are oriented towards withdrawing (of their own accord) or (secretly) gaining access to situations, Type 3 children problematize – and thereby

reveal a characteristic ambivalence at – not being seen or heard and not having a role in making decisions. A fundamental dilemma faced by this type is thus revealed: The orientation they adopt towards being informed by adults cannot be realized from their position as children.

Dimension 3: Proximity/distance between family and school

The Type 3 orientations lie “between” the other two types. In their narratives, they are oriented neither towards the proximity of their families to school (Type 1), nor towards keeping both systems apart (Type 2). Any overlaps between family and school are negotiated in neither positive nor negative terms, but seen instead as a matter of necessity, and tend to be negotiated casually. This again documents the children’s experiences of being powerless to take action. Parents and teachers must work together to sort out “their” affairs – children are not in a position to contribute here. Even if these groups portray this situation as a problem, it is not a reason for them to “forge their own path” so they can have a greater say. Their path, instead, is to distance themselves from parent-teacher interactions and accept that things are the way they are – i.e. follow what their teachers and parents say and do.

Overall, it is clear that – against the background of their varied experiences of being involved as children in shaping the family-school relationship – children process the orientation problem they face in ways that are not only different but multifaceted. The present analysis shows that close relationships between family and school are not necessarily in the children’s own interests and that children act in various ways at the intersection of family and school. At the same time, however, their position as children always plays a role in the orientations they adopt and makes it possible to take other paths – absenting themselves from meetings, for example, or ignoring adults’ discussions.

Separate experiential spaces? On the social situatedness of collective orientations

Socio-structural and socio-cultural data were examined along with statements made in the interviews with the participating adults in order to identify correlations between the types of groups described above and the children’s social situatedness.

Type 1 groups attend schools whose students tend to be socially privileged and reside in urban environments. The families of these children are described as being interested in primary and secondary education. This can be seen in teachers’ assessments of parents as being very engaged and present at parents’ evenings. One aspect that is striking when compared with the other two types is that all the Type 1 children were born in Germany. For half of the Type 1 children, one or both parents are described as being of non-German heritage and the children in these groups grow up bi- or multi-lingually. This is a higher share than for either of the other two types. Overall, it can be assumed that these children are situated in a social environment which offers a relatively high level of resources.

Only a small percentage of Type 2 children are attributed non-German heritage, their families are smaller than for both other types, and the schools they attend tend to be located in rural settings. It is striking here that a difference between family and school exists not only in the orientations that guide the children’s

actions, but also in how teachers portray contact with families. Compared to the other two types, the children here seem to forge their own paths, something indicated by the limited knowledge of parents' occupations combined with the orientations guiding the actions of this type.

By contrast, Type 3 children tend to belong to the urban working class. This cohort also has a comparatively high share of children who were not born in Germany. Overall, however, this type is very heterogeneous in terms of its social situatedness, and the action-guiding orientations are thus found among groups with, in social terms, very different experiential spaces.

When these initial findings are compared, it becomes clear what is *not* a common experiential space for a given type. This allows the following empirical postulations to be formulated:

- The types cannot be differentiated by age.
- Collective orientations guiding actions are not specific to school classes.
- Differences in experiential spaces specific to gender or region cannot unambiguously explain differences in orientations.

Ultimately, additional research is needed to more closely examine these first indications of the various possible socio-cultural and socio-structural commonalities and differences between the types.

The findings from the empirical analysis summarized here allow challenges to be formulated for shaping the relationship between family and primary school. These challenges are described below.

4 Challenges for shaping cooperation between family and school

Shaping family-school relations – and, more specifically, cooperation and educational partnership – is a core task for actors at different policy and educational levels and in different societal subsystems: at schools, among school administrators, at institutions of education and training, among parent and student representatives, within specialized discourse, in the political arena, etc. As this research report shows, moreover, teachers, parents and children are also involved in how the cooperation between families and schools is shaped, namely through a complex interplay of current everyday realities and the requirements resulting from them, and organizational, professional and societal needs.

The specific challenges outlined below, which are derived from the study's findings, are based on a *reflexive and inequality-sensitive understanding of cooperation* between family and school, one that views “good cooperation” as being dependent on perspective (see Betz et al. 2019). This dependence relates, on the one hand, to the attitudes, expectations and experiences of specific groups of actors (e.g. children, parents, teachers) as they pertain to cooperation and, on the other, to the different attitudes found within these groups. This takes into consideration the knowledge that the shaping of the family-school relationship, and views of it, depend on the location and specific *position* of those involved. Different participants contribute to shaping this relationship in highly varied, although not arbitrary, but clearly defined ways. The focus here is on the *children*, who have rarely been considered as relevant actors in this context until now.

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

What can an empirical analysis of the perspectives and positions of children and their experiences of cooperation contribute to the current educational, academic and policy debate and to the framing of cooperation and educational partnerships?

The following points illustrate the demanding task different actors face in shaping family-school relations, especially in light of social inequality and the resulting power structures. Power structures of this sort are often seen: between teachers and parents, school and family, members of the social majority and social minorities, individuals with privileged backgrounds and those with fewer privileges, adults and children, and other social groups and institutions. These groups intersect in various ways.

The following six challenges are meant, above all, for political decision makers; those involved in providing support for schools; school boards; parent and student representatives; and educational institutions, including directors and teachers. At the same time, these problem-oriented interpretations of the study's findings also address actors in the areas of educational policy and academia.

(1) *Programmatic writings and empirical realities: further developing educational and policy guidelines in an inequality-sensitive manner*

Children and their well-being are the “focal point” of educational and policy programs targeting the educational partnership; like parents cooperating with teachers, students/children are viewed as “partners” to parents and teachers (see e.g. Epstein 2002, p. 7; Sacher 2014, p. 173). Children (and parents)⁵ are thus ascribed, on a symbolic level, a relatively new, more highly regarded status. Comparable to the educational debate on early child education and care (see Betz et al. 2019; Betz & Bollig 2019), children have been made, semantically, into equal partners with equal rights who are to be recognized, valued and respected, who engage – or should engage – in an ongoing dialogue with the other (adult) participants and whose relationship to the others is based on mutual trust. The introduction of three-way conferences – between teacher, parents and student – is also seen in terms of participation and democratic education; it is referred to as a “constructive dialogue among equals”⁶ (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018b, p. 53 as pertains to Rhineland-Palatinate), a “conversation among equals – who are partners” (Ministerium für Bildung & Landeselternbeirat Rheinland-Pfalz 2018, no page) and a new culture of feedback (ibid.).⁷

It is not yet possible to assess the extent to which this new status children are being assigned at school is being realized at the micro-level as part of *real-world efforts* to shape family-school cooperation, since only a few studies and initial empirical insights (such as those provided by *Children at the Crossroads*) exist on the subject. This would require more in-depth, micro-level analysis of participants' interactions, perspectives and positions, as seen in parent-teacher-student conferences, learning development talks and other venues for shaping family-school relations. Additional research is thus required (see Point 6).

However, the empirical findings from the interviews and discussions with primary-school students already permit the conclusion to be drawn that *adults and children are not equal partners* when it comes to shaping family-school relations; a significant discrepancy between programmatic objectives and empirical reality is evident instead. Various power structures, especially generational ones, become apparent between adults and children within (educational) policy documents and the contexts from which they have emerged, as well as in the reconstruction of children's perspectives and positions: Children's concerns are overlooked and ignored – something that has received little attention in educational and policy writings until now.

5 To what degree parents are or can be partners to teachers is a question that has been discussed elsewhere in light of numerous studies on the subject (see e.g. Betz 2015; Betz et al. 2017).

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

7 These talks among parents (or guardians), teachers and students are also a tool for promoting individualized learning; emphasis is placed on the importance of the “perspective of the children and adolescents” during the talks (Freistaat Thüringen & Institut für Lehrerfortbildung, Lehrplanentwicklung und Medien 2015, p. 1).

What is therefore needed is *further development of guidelines and specifications* for shaping cooperation between family and school that are, above all, sensitive to the *generational disparities in power* between adults and children – especially in the school (achievement) context. These guidelines must reference findings from theoretical research, both social and educational, and must take children’s *perspectives* into account (see Point 6).



Educational and policy writings

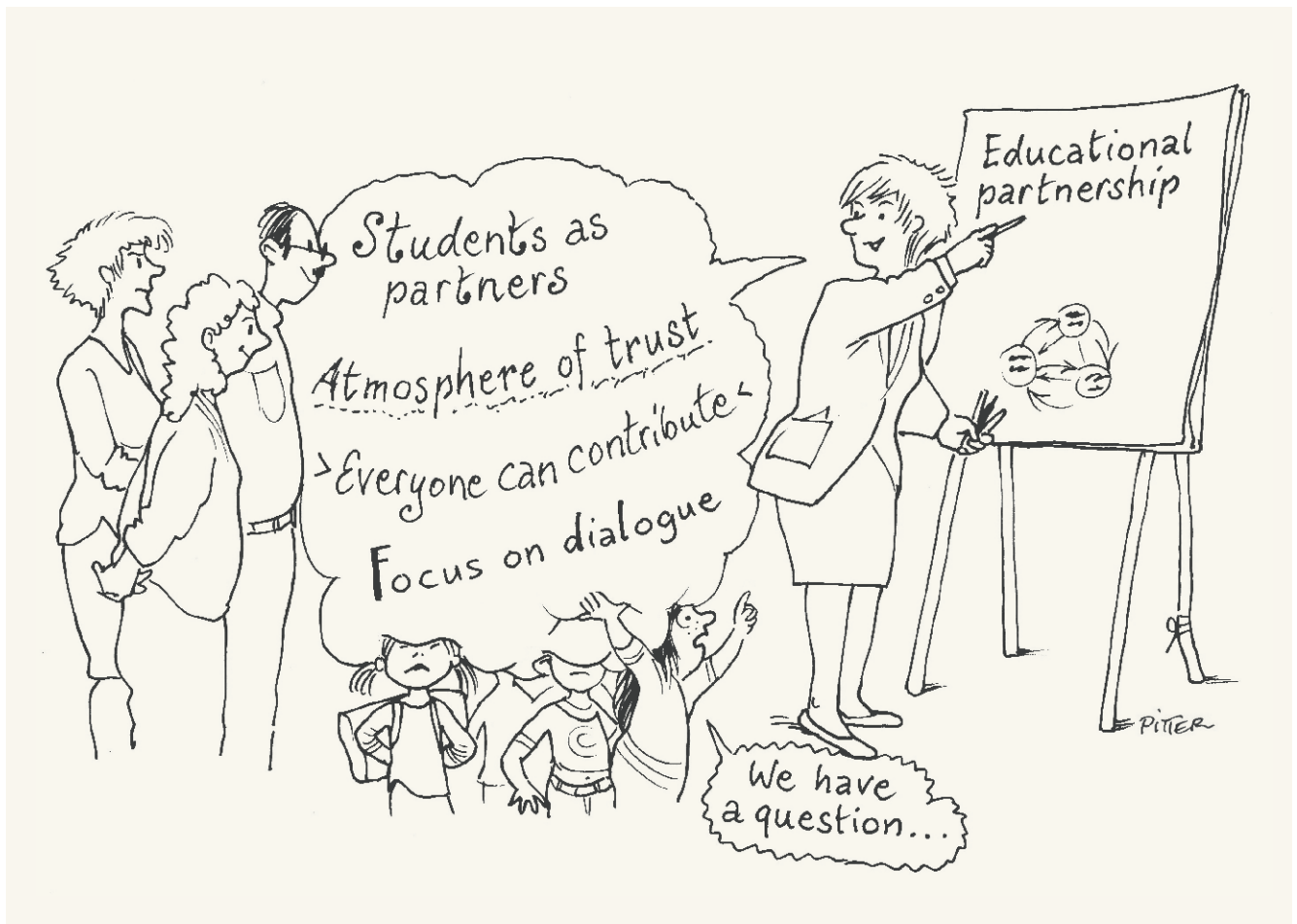
Children and their perspectives and positions are only partially included in practical guidelines for schools, and in policy decisions on cooperation between parents and schools and on the educational partnership between *all* participants. The documents, agreements, pilot projects and political initiatives that have already been written or implemented seem to have been initiated and drafted, and the corresponding conclusions drawn and directives codified, almost exclusively without the participation of children, e.g. without inclusion of student representatives, and thus by adult experts.⁸ This is particularly true for primary schools.

At the same time, these writings contain few indications that children, given their position, *might* have or articulate other perspectives within the cooperation

⁸ Additional details can be found in the complete report.

or *might* focus on other issues, compared to those chosen by certain adults (on behalf of children).⁹ What is evident instead is, on the one hand, a depiction of the fundamental interests and goals shared by children and adults, teachers and parents. This is expressed, for example, in the mission statement for “shared educational success” published by the Rhineland–Palatinate Ministry of Education (Ministerium für Bildung & Landeselternbeirat Rheinland–Pfalz 2018, no page). On the other hand, it is taken for granted that adult experts know best what children need (for the future), how societal challenges and the children’s collective and individual problems should be solved, how tomorrow’s schools should be designed and the family–school relationship shaped.

A prime example of this adult–centric approach can be seen, *first*, in the fact that recommendations for concretizing the partnership refer primarily to adults. For instance, one publication suggests working with parents (and thus *not* with students) to develop “solutions to students’ problems” (Kultusministerkonferenz 2013, p. 6), as described by organizations representing people with non-native backgrounds in a joint declaration with Germany’s Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs.



⁹ The empirical analyses in this research report show the degree to which children conform to existing rules and practices, and consent to existing school forms and to the relevant forms for shaping family–school relations.

Second, calls are being made to place a greater focus in the first and second phase of teacher training on “joint educational efforts,” such as “organizing parents’ evenings, parent-teacher conferences and counseling sessions for parents” (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a, p. 8, emphasis added).

Another example of adult-centric viewpoints and a lack of sensibility to generational inequality is that, *third*, in policy writings the position of children is limited given that children are to be included in the partnership “in an appropriate manner” (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a, p. 2) and “according to their level of development” (ibid., p. 3) (see corresponding findings on the legal framework in Betz et al. 2017, p. 48ff.). These conditions are not mentioned for the adults participating “as equals” in the partnership – although the “appropriate” inclusion of parents, for example, also requires clarification, since it is not as readily defined as it initially seems in numerous programmatic writings.

The focus on adults becomes evident, *fourth*, in adults’ rights being consistently cited as they pertain to information and counseling,¹⁰ for example, while the rights of children and students (to shape family-school relations) are only partially addressed and not accorded a similar level of attention.

Interviews with children and group discussions

In terms of shaping family-school relations, the difference between being a child and being an adult is of crucial importance for the children surveyed: Taking the three-way talks as a concrete example, children are acutely aware – as they clearly articulate – that such talks are almost exclusively held so that their performance in school can be assessed by adults (mostly teachers) and so that they become better students.

In the interviews and group discussions, the topic addressed by participants was not impromptu meetings, as are often called for in educational policy circles,¹¹ neither was it a partnership among equals or (not even between the lines) an “equal” relationship. The specific position of being “children” instead goes hand in hand with the fact that the children’s actorship and their options for taking action at school *are and can be limited* (e.g. at parents’ evenings) and *made possible* (e.g. at meetings in which *children participate* such as three-way talks) by those individuals – teachers and parents – on whom educational and policy experts focus their attention when it comes to shaping cooperation and partnership.

Ultimately, it is an *empirical question* as to whether, for which combinations and under which conditions one *can* speak of “a meeting of equals” (Hessisches Kultusministerium & Landeselternbeirat von Hessen 2013) among the participants: teachers, parents and children. Answering that question would require empirical studies and process-oriented procedures that can provide insight into the realized measures for shaping “partnerships among all participants” and make it possible to observe changes in family-school interactions as the relevant processes unfold.

¹⁰ For an overview of the legal, policy and educational framework in all 16 German federal states, see Kultusministerkonferenz (2018b).

¹¹ See e.g. Ministerium für Bildung (2018, p. 12); Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern & Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst (2014, p. 25f.).

(2) *Reconceptualization of quality standards and initiatives for shaping family-school interactions as expressions of the educational partnership; process-oriented consideration of heterogeneous perspectives at school and unequal positions within the cooperation with families*

The typologies of “good partnership” heretofore developed by numerous researchers, especially the widespread models based on the work of Joyce Epstein, are primarily oriented to adults’ specific interests (cf. Betz et al. 2017, p. 76ff.). The standards of “good partnership” are too rarely considered relative to *the diverse perspectives of all participants and to the positions of children in family-school interactions*.¹² When children are positioned in the typologies and standards (see e.g. Epstein 1995, 2002), the focus is primarily on their school performance and their developmental progress. Students – and, more concretely, their achievement, competencies, learning successes, etc. – are thus mainly the *result* of “good partnership”: Educational success at school is the best possible *outcome* that the adult “partners”¹³ are capable of achieving.¹⁴

The empirical focus on the positions and perspectives of children in family-school relations, however, makes it possible to question the dominant models and standards of “good cooperation” and of the educational partnership and thus to set new priorities in schools. In contrast to what is commonly found in programmatic writings (see e.g. Betz 2015, 2018), this makes *difficulties and ambivalences* experienced by *(certain) children* more apparent, factors that can be addressed at school and that must be observed and evaluated within the relevant processes and in dialogue with all participants.

Interviews with children and group discussions

Based on the collective orientations of the children, it was possible, *first*, to show that *some* children share the experience of benefitting from a close relationship and lively exchange between the systems of family and school – a situation educational professionals consider favorable and have therefore endorsed. Yet as the findings suggest, endorsement of this situation tends to favor *children from more advantaged families*. Although increased family-school interaction, greater exchange and more effective communication are often seen as evidence of *excellence for everyone*, they also result in *certain* children feeling a greater sense of powerlessness and that they are being ignored by adults (see Point 1); teachers and parents meeting more often is something these children find unpleasant, stressful and sometimes frightening.

The inevitability of verbal, digital and written exchange between family and school and the resulting sense of powerlessness these children feel – something clearly expressed in a number of the interviews and group discussions – has been given too little attention in the general approaches and universal calls for more intensive

12 They are also applied too seldomly to the perspectives and positions of adults who are directly involved, such as those parents who are little inclined or able to participate in the way they are expected to (for detailed findings, see Betz et al. 2017).

13 The necessary question as to whether a partnership can exist between parents and teachers has already been mentioned and has been discussed at length elsewhere (see e.g. Betz 2015; Betz et al. 2017).

14 Publications relating to Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern (Foundation for the Bavarian Educational Pact) go beyond the subject of success at school. They also discuss the “high-skilled workers of tomorrow” (Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 6); the educational partnership is seen as one piece of the puzzle within larger reforms of the educational system (ibid., p. 12).

exchange, more family-school cooperation and greater inclusion of parents. This assessment remains true even when learning development talks are not considered in an educational and policy context relating to family-school partnerships and cooperation, but in the context of providing individual feedback and learning support (Dollinger 2019).

In terms of promoting excellence through various forms of more intensive family-school interaction – including more (learning development) talks between parents, children and teachers – another aspect which must also be taken into account is that *as a form of partnership, more intensive family-school interactions can reinforce educational inequalities among children* (see Point 5). One aspect that must be considered is that the increasingly prevalent instruments for individualization, e.g. learning development talks, which are meant to achieve a number of goals such as making access to educational opportunities more equitable at primary schools (see e.g. Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 6), not only fail to reduce inequalities among children, but can exacerbate them instead. More discourse and debates are needed here (see Point 3) along with detailed (accompanying) research that is able and willing to explore in a differentiated and inequality-sensitive manner the (compensatory) effects of various instruments and types of family-school interaction (see Point 6).

When children are asked, what becomes apparent, *second*, is that they do not express support for the standard or hallmark of “good partnership” which asserts that the school or teachers should be thoroughly informed about home life, especially goings-on in the family and children’s behavior outside of school (see e.g. Epstein 2002), and that more communication in all forms (digital, written, verbal) is necessary. Calls for achieving this can be found in guidelines such as those asserting that teachers and parents should inform each other “of everything that is significant for the education and upbringing of students” (Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern 2014, p. 14). The desired increase in communication and exchange between family and school goes hand in hand with the idea that children should no longer be seen only as students, but students should also be seen as children within their family environment (and beyond that in the community) – as Epstein (2002, p. 7), among others, emphasizes.

Yet the findings from *Children at the Crossroads* also show the ambivalence children can feel at being included in a “comprehensive” sense – not only “as a student” but also “as a child” – in shaping family-school relations, since *what* is “significant for the education and upbringing of students” is not determined by the children themselves; nor do they decide *who* in the family will inform teachers, *how* the exchange between family and school will be handled and *what* will be communicated through it. Yet it is very important to children that secrets or personal matters do *not* become public, especially at school, and that teachers are *not* privy to them.

The findings presented here about children’s orientations thus clearly contradict the calls found in educational plans, among other places, that educational institutions and families should be more open to each other and should engage in a “transparent dialogue”, something often viewed as indicating a good educational partnership (see e.g. Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013, p. 14). This includes the advocacy of home visits (see e.g. OECD 2012, p. 46; Epstein et al. 2002; cf. Betz et al.

2017, p. 155). For children, the family is especially important as a “protective space” (see findings and advocacy by Edwards & Alldred 2000) that must be respected – an aspect that is given virtually no attention in the prevailing approaches.

Third, the hallmarks of “good cooperation” mostly reflect the assumption that all participants have shared interests (Epstein 2002, p. 7; Ministerium für Bildung & Landeselternbeirat Rheinland-Pfalz 2018, no page). For example, in its enumeration of the hallmarks of good parental outreach by schools, the Vodafone Foundation emphasizes that all participants – including students – must “obtain and supply relevant information and play a constructive role in further developing the cooperative exchange” (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013, p. 4). The findings presented here, however, clearly show that such calls to action are not sensitive enough to children’s *legitimate interests*. Children endorse such a policy only to a limited extent.

Something that warrants critical discussion is the basic assumption present in such specifications and standards that information exists which is equally “relevant” for all participants, i.e. a shared understanding of what a “constructive further development” of the “cooperative exchange” would be, and that all parties have the same interest in and a possibility for intensifying their participation accordingly. Greater recognition is also needed that efforts to intensify the exchange between families and schools and to increase transparency (Wutzler 2019) are not necessarily desirable or realistic from the children’s perspective. Additionally, the present empirical analysis of the children’s statements on cooperation show that children pursue – or can pursue – their own agenda, one that does not automatically match the interests of “the” (i.e. all) adults¹⁵ (for an analysis of the preschool situation, see Betz et al. 2019). The findings show instead that certain children use subtle practices to “absent themselves” from meetings; similarly, they do not want to recount at home unpleasant experiences that have taken place at school, and they object to events they experience at home being discussed at school. A diverse range of perspectives thus exists of family–school interactions.

It can therefore be assumed that interests *might* be present which are shared by all participants, but not that they actually exist in the everyday school context or must exist in communication-related situations or venues. To reconceptualize what is meant by quality cooperation, it would be necessary instead to identify and explore in much greater detail the shared, differing and, in some cases, opposing interests of individuals and groups present in exchanges taking place between schools and families, as well as within schools and among teachers. In other words this means, neither to presuppose nor to pretend such interests exist, nor to prematurely dismiss any differences with statements such as “that kind of thing doesn’t happen here”. One aspect that should be kept in mind is that interests, whether they are shared or differing, can change over time or depending on circumstances, i.e. they are clearly present or can be expressed in certain situations or constellations, something that is not or becomes no longer true in others. This would require a nuanced, process-oriented exploration of the specific interests evinced by the actors directly involved in shaping everyday school life.

15 That “the” adults have shared interests, as is often suggested in the programmatic writings, is an idea that also merits closer examination.

From the children's point of view, and in light of the challenge of reducing educational inequalities between children, widespread standards and initiatives for ensuring quality would have to be reconceptualized. This cannot only be seen as a task and challenge for *further developing educational guidelines and policy requirements* (see Point 1), but also for shaping good family-school interactions on the level of schools and classrooms and thus for school development in general. School actors, such as principals, teachers and parent representatives, play a central role in shaping family-school interactions by entering into an exchange with children and other parents, for example at meetings and other venues for addressing cooperation and the corresponding guidelines. Implementing initiatives and possibilities for cooperation on the school level in a way that is reflexive and *also* oriented towards children's needs and interests would require process-oriented evaluations to be initiated and further developed that make it possible to consider over a longer period of time and *also from the children's perspective* the everyday approaches (such as three-way conferences) used at school. Similarly, the foundations could be laid for adapting measures that have already been introduced and approaches that have proven their worth and, moreover, doing so within the relevant processes and in an inequality-sensitive manner. Something that must be kept in mind here is that, while trust between family and school is one of many important and necessary prerequisites for good family-school interactions, it is a subject that has not been adequately addressed – since activities in this area have, for example, focused too one-sidedly on trust (and building it) among adults, schools and parents (see e.g. Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 15), even though children can withdraw their trust from their parents or teachers, such as when they discover that this trust has been abused because personal information has been shared inappropriately.

(3) *Educational partnerships as a silver bullet? Initiating and facilitating dialogue among various participants, raising awareness of ambivalences*

In the school context, it hardly seems possible to question the concept of the educational partnership and its necessity.¹⁶ Authoritative positions taken by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education, among others, and the assertion that the constitutional mandate of parents and the state (Articles 6 and 7 of Germany's Basic Law)¹⁷ can “*only be successfully executed in a cooperative partnership*” (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a, p. 2, emphasis added) render any criticism virtually illegitimate, along with any empirical, theoretical and practical questions about the ideal of having such a partnership. Yet the insistence in educational and policy circles on “Partnership!” must be opened to discussion, and its empirical content scrutinized. There are several reasons for this.

First, from an educational and social scientific perspective, there is only a very weak empirical basis for calls for and, more recently, binding resolutions requiring cooperation with parents as partners.¹⁸ This assessment is especially true given the fact that cooperation among equals is investigated and measured in studies in very different ways, and given that, upon closer examination, research findings which

16 This assessment is also true for the educational partnership between ECEC centers and families (see Betz et al. 2019, p. 248).

17 The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education maintains that “school and parents ... [bear] responsibility for educating and rearing children and adolescents” (Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a, p. 2).

18 For more on the few and ambivalent empirical fundamentals, see e.g. Betz et al. (2017).

ostensibly prove the success of educational partnerships have focused on multiple forms of parental involvement and measures for working with parents (for an extensive discussion, see Betz et al. 2017) and come to different conclusions. There are very few empirical findings on the positions taken by primary-school children in the educational partnership as expressed through family-school interactions, or what it might mean for the children to become, directly or indirectly, part of such a family-school partnership (see e.g. Betz et al. 2017, p. 157ff.; see Point 6).

Second, there has been little research on the impacts. What, for example, does “successful” mean in the declaration made by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education as cited above? What are the *compensatory* effects of educational partnerships? Only few studies address this subject (ibid.). The declaration jointly made by the organizations representing people of non-native heritage in Germany and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education (Kultusministerkonferenz 2013), which states that more equitable opportunities will or should be realized through partnership (ibid., p. 1), seems not to have come to fruition in empirical terms; in any event, relevant research findings are lacking. What is expressed in the declaration is the hope that disadvantaged students will have better opportunities as a result of an educational partnership achieved through family-school interactions – not a proof that these opportunities have become reality.

Third, many policy and programmatic writings only “point to” or posit impacts (see Betz et al. 2017), while *side effects* from the propagated approaches for shaping family-school relations are given little consideration, even if they are already known or can with great probability be assumed to exist – something that is also true of the *ambivalences* about these approaches that result. Yet it is only this expanded viewpoint that makes it possible to pose critical questions about educational partnerships – particularly in light of the promise that specific forms of partnership could serve as suitable instruments for reducing educational inequalities.¹⁹

This discounting of unwanted effects and of numerous ambivalences can be seen, for example, in the unfailingly positive connotations attached to what can or has already been achieved in and through cooperative partnerships (see e.g. OECD 2018),²⁰ or in the emphasis put on communicating in the spirit of partnership, which not infrequently means in a consensus-based manner (Betz et al. 2017, p. 129f.), and ensuring meetings take place “among equals” (see e.g. Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 12).

What is necessary, however, is a more robust discussion of the forms, possibilities and goals, *and, at the same time*, the limits and risks of educational partnerships between family and school, including a broad discussion of the barriers faced by *certain children and their families* (see Point 2). This discussion must take place as part of an exchange among actors from academia, politics and school practice, as well as parents, parent representatives, children and student representatives, not to mention actors from the supra-school level and teacher training institutes. How do those directly involved want to collaborate to shape the family-school

19 For example, see the critical studies from various countries which are cited in Betz et al. (2017) but which are rarely considered in educational policy writings and arguments.

20 For a more detailed discussion, see the complete research report.

relationship? What do they consider the relevant standards to be? What can be realistically practiced in schools – and in families – and which framework conditions are required for this (see Point 4)? Which experiences, good and bad, have teachers, principals, parents (and their representatives), children and student representatives had in concrete situations and constellations as part of family-school interactions? What possibilities do participants have (e.g. in the prevailing discussion venues) to speak of things they find irritating and, when necessary, to introduce differing assessments and viewpoints?

At the same time, open-ended, dialogue-driven venues and possibilities for discursive exchange are needed to engage reflexively with the many dilemmatic and, for those involved, ambivalent requirements inherent to the concept. Where necessary, moreover, alternative options for cooperation with parents must be found and realized on the level of school boards and individual schools. Such a process, however, is made more difficult when *a certain type of cooperative, family-school interaction* is presented as unavoidable and is directly linked to specific standards of “good cooperation” that are meant to apply across the board (see e.g. Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a).

After all, there are many dilemmas in partnership-based interactions between family and school that make considerable demands on those directly involved. These include the purported relationship among equals (“everyone is a partner”) versus the professional-layperson relationship between school and parents; the relationship between symmetry and intervention; and the relationship between symmetry and compensation for disadvantages. Added to this are the numerous demands made on everyone involved in a cooperation among equals that entails or is supposed to entail more communication, interaction, information, transparency, cooperation, etc. (see Point 4). These demands are felt even more when a greater focus is placed on children as (potential) partners in family-school interactions.

Fourth, practical guidelines for schools and parents usually contain clear goals, as do programmatic writings and policy directives on cooperation as an educational partnership: The adult concern about children, as expressed in the relevant publications, focuses on optimal success in school for *all* children and on success in children’s post-school lives. The efforts and approaches meant to implement educational partnerships and dialogue formats between family and school thus aim to *optimize childhood*, in the guise of “optimizing educational success” (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013, p. 4), “optimal personality development” (Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern 2014, p. 6) and optimizing “future learning as a shared responsibility” (Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern & Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 15). To that extent, the focus is often on childhoods that are considered disadvantaged and that are meant to be optimized through a closer, more effective interplay of family and school.

Both a discussion and reflective consideration of this common narrative is needed, since optimization is not only a normative pattern and central paradigm (Wutzler 2019, p. 29f.),²¹ it is and will become a social reality for children of primary-school

21 Wutzler (2019) speaks (referring to the child’s well-being) of the “imperative of cooperation,” given that “everyone involved in care [should] take an active and preventive role, since cooperation increases the exchange of knowledge and the propensity for engagement and, thus, the visibility of growing up” (ibid., p. 30).

age.²² Moreover, the greater involvement of children in the partnership, e.g. their participation in various dialogue formats, is also related to optimization efforts. In this interpretation, children contribute *to their own optimization*²³ – they are expected to share responsibility when calls are made for everyone to participate (see e.g. Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013, p. 4).

In this context, the almost exclusively positive connotation and propagation of impromptu contacts (see e.g. Sacher 2014, p. 180f.) and of more transparency between family and school obscures the fact that access to children – and teachers and parents – increases as a result. The risks inherent in such contacts lie – especially against the background of using the contacts to increase the chances of educational success for all school children – in the fact that there are then essentially no longer any limits: When the policy and educational requirement is that participants should be in contact independent of any specific reason, should inform each other about all topics and should obtain and deliver “relevant” information (and do this as part of school practice), then what convincing criterium and argument would there be to limit the number of contacts and subjects of exchange? Ultimately, could not every further intensification of contact, every additional communication about what is “significant for the education and upbringing of children” be potentially favorable for the children’s development and achievement at school and, thus, contribute to optimal performance, success and development? The propagated impromptu communication “among partners” can thus be seen as an optimization strategy. With that, the educational partnership also takes another step towards being a preventive strategy or program, or a normalization measure (Wutzler 2019; Betz & Bischoff 2013). Yet the corresponding writings and guidelines do not note that, when it comes to such requirements and to expanding preventive measures, the resulting ambivalences and risks should also be accounted for and should be discussed by the various participants (see e.g. Bröckling 2019).

(4) *Establishing and securing procedures and structures for involving children, reflecting on the impositions that result*

Increasing children’s involvement is framed very positively in many writings (keyword: “risking more involvement/participation”); it is also referenced in the debates about and calls for partnership, for example in terms of greater participation by children in parent-teacher meetings – in order to include their viewpoints, among other aspects. Yet as the findings from the present study demonstrate, possibilities for involving children at primary schools can be seen as *opportunities* for the children, but the children’s *fears* of participatory events, often based on concrete experience, must always also be taken into account. Moreover, *imperatives and impositions* must be considered that result from the children’s more intensive participation – as they affect the children themselves, any adults taking part, or the shaping of the interactions. Institutionalized *procedures and processes* are therefore needed at both the school and supra-school level which facilitate and secure children’s involvement in venues for shaping the family-school relationship, but which *at the same time* reflexively counter the *impositions that result from the children’s greater involvement*.

22 For more on the curricularization of childhood, see Ericsson & Larsen (2002); for optimization, Betz & Bischoff (2018).

23 Epstein (2002) describes it thus: “Partnership activities may be designed to [...] motivate students to produce their own successes” (ibid., p. 8).

The analytical findings presented here can be read, *first*, as indicating the importance of expanding the current debate on children's rights and democratic education *in schools* to include a discussion of the forms of children's involvement in the relationship *between* family and school (see Betz et al. 2017, p. 133ff.). The findings are then of interest in two respects: First, the interviewed children ascribe themselves a *key position in interinstitutional communication*. Their own position is, however, *precarious and uncertain*; it can be overruled by adults and organizational-related requirements in a variety of ways. The children then have no (more) control over the flow of information between family and school. Information, photos and stories are exchanged against their will between parents and teachers, and they are not able to prevent it. Their position at the intersection of the family and school system is often undermined, or it can be, for example when parents "blab" personal matters or teachers forward pictures to parents without the children's consent.

As the findings also demonstrate, children take it for granted that adults occupy *the dominant position in interinstitutional communication*. The children's involvement in shaping the family-school relationship is largely influenced by their position as "children": Children *receive* information, *are included*, *are permitted* to have a say, *can* contribute – or not. Children need teachers and parents, along with clear and familiar procedures, to gain access to knowledge, situations, etc. As the findings also show, this access is, in some cases, withheld from them – for example when parents do not provide answers to children's questions about parents' evening – and, in some cases, is primarily granted by parents, when they do provide their children with information. On their own, children only have limited opportunities to gain access to knowledge, experiences, etc. (for instance, when they eavesdrop on conversations).

Second, for *primary schools*, there is no *across-the-board, binding, institutionalized representation of students as of Grade 1* that can advocate for the concerns of students in this particular age group and at this type of school, or that are planned as fixed forms of participation in school-development processes and cross-school reforms. It must therefore be assumed that the interests and concerns of students at primary schools will rarely be expressed – or can be expressed – in debates on the shaping of family-school relations, or in the reforms that have already been introduced and the guidelines on how schools should shape their interactions with families. In practical terms, the participation or non-participation of children at primary schools depends on the specific circumstances at each school and on individual teachers, parents and children. There is a great need for action here.²⁴

Third, children sometimes position themselves in the interviews and group discussions as *not being physically present* in meetings between parents and teachers. This non-participation is not necessarily seen as negative. Children, one could say, do not exercise their right to participate (UN-CRC) – in this case, when there is contact between home and school (such as parent's evenings), during which subjects are addressed that pertain to children and are, thus, "matters affecting the

24 At this point, the adult-centric nature of current standards for good partnership can be witnessed yet again (see Point 1 and 2): Calls have been made and stipulations set that parents should be or become advocates for every child (see e.g. Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013, p. 15); that children can also advocate for children is something given far too little attention and rarely explicitly called for, particularly in the context of primary school.

child” (UN-CRC). What becomes clear instead in the conversations and interviews with the children is that most of them find the prevailing situation at primary school very satisfactory, whether participation occurs or not, and only few of them feel the need to express criticism. To that extent, the children largely consent to current practice – regardless, it seems, of whether that practice focuses on participation or not.²⁵ Thus, structures need to be established and anchored that inform children of their position(s) and the resulting rights (including the right to complain). Above all, this is relevant given that writings on participating in the shaping of family-school relations target schools and teachers in particular (see e.g. Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland 2013), as well as parents and parent representatives, who are informed in detail about the relevant structures and their rights (see e.g. Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 16ff.). Only sporadically do the relevant documents *also* discuss the positions and perspectives of children and students,²⁶ and/or address them and provide the pertinent information (see e.g. Hessisches Kultusministerium & Landeselternbeirat von Hessen 2013, p. 32f.). Yet the right to information and counselling are rights explicitly granted students in education acts.²⁷

Fourth, the findings show that when parents, teacher and student come together, as at three-way conferences, some children view *their own participation positively*, others *negatively*. Some position themselves as interested in three-way conferences and approve of receiving significant information “first hand”; they like knowing what is at stake and what is important if they are to progress at school. At the same time, some children are uninterested; they clearly indicate the ways they withdraw from such meetings, from which they derive little pleasure. These findings thus show that calls to give greater participatory positions to children “per se” – whether that be as discussion partners or “contractual partners” (see e.g. Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern & Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 28) – should be viewed in a differentiated manner and with a degree of ambivalence. This is also true in light of the present findings, which show that certain children have their reservations prior to such meetings: They express fear about what will happen when participatory situations and constellations are imminent (e.g. three-way talks). They say that, *as children*, they cannot control the conversation and thus risk having “personal” topics “come to light” that they consider part of their home life or school life (see above). Thus, for them, participation is a risk. This can be ascribed, beyond their position as “the children,” to the context of their involvement (e.g. three-way or learning development talk), since the subject of three-way conferences is ultimately one person: the student, and his or her performance, learning and responsibilities.

Another factor that must be considered is, *fifth*: Because of the obligation to have children participate in interinstitutional talks (usually learning development talks) in some German states, children are not only positioned and (must) act within the teacher-student relationship, on the one hand, and the parent-child relationship, on the other; through their participation in specific formats of this sort, they are

25 Whether this is because the children in the sample are unaware of their rights (to participate), or their agreement results from other factors, is something that cannot be presently explained.

26 The documents refer primarily to students and not children.

27 See Kultusministerkonferenz (2018b) as it pertains, among other aspects, to the state of Hesse's Education Act.

also included in yet another way as children and students in the school-parent relationship. They thus act not only in a relatively new constellation, but in an *additional and, at the same time, demanding one*.

This expanded involvement of children should not be underestimated, given that some writings on three-way conferences and other discussion formats emphasize the significance of discussion-facilitation techniques for adults as a way of ensuring an ability to communicate “among equals” (see e.g. Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 15). Mention is also made of the necessity of imparting discussion techniques (Sacher 2014, p. 185) and “communication competency” to students as well (Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Weiterbildung und Kultur n. d., p. 3). When it is maintained in the writings that “all participants have a say and exchange views” in learning development talks (Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 108) and that in three-way talks “the perspectives of all participants [are] brought together” (Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 10), then the question arises, on the one hand, of which perspectives are or can be expressed at all and, on the other, how such a “bringing together” actually happens and which challenges thus ensue for all participants in the real-world situation (see Mundwiler 2017).

Even if all adults and children involved in the conversation are outstandingly prepared and have expert communication skills, it cannot be assumed that in such situations and constellations in the school context all participants can or will – as postulated – actually contribute “their perspectives,” or that everyone will be “taken seriously” and that generational power structures can be temporarily overcome in the “unencumbered atmosphere” of regular discussions (Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 12). Thus, not only must significantly more insights be gained into these discussion formats using social scientific and linguistic analyses, as has been done to some extent in this and other studies (see e.g. Bonanati 2018; see Point 6); greater awareness is needed of the fact that involving children brings with it the challenge of actually taking seriously any concerns they might have. This is especially true when their concerns conflict with those of the participating adults.

To what extent, it must be asked, is resistance (on the part of children) legitimate? Is it even articulated? To what extent are space and resources available for dealing with it? What results when children participate in meetings if they not only say they want to improve themselves, but also demand that teachers and/or parents change as well? What is the appropriate response to the fact that, when at least three people are present discussing different topics, then different perspectives – including between teacher and parents, or parents, teacher and child – could be continuously expressed?

Sixth, another imposition is thus being made on children as part of their involvement in (learning development and three-way) meetings: Children of primary school age are to train themselves so they can actually participate in these discussion formats. They are, of their own volition, to take on the new role of learner and assess their own learning development and achievement, and articulate it in a discussion held in German in accordance with usual monolingual school practice. As one source writes (Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 107): (Learning development) meetings between parents, teacher and student addressing the child’s actual performance and “self-set goals can

contribute to developing a realistic assessment of her own performance, taking responsibility for her own learning and motivating her to learn independently”. Elsewhere as well, three-way meetings are portrayed as designed to engender “an increase in their self-motivation and self-responsibility” (Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 12).



What becomes obvious, not only over the course of the meeting but even more so through the format used for such meetings, is the greater responsibility being assigned to children. This is also apparent in the agreement that participants are expected to strive for as such meetings conclude: The subject matter discussed should directly result in “the setting of child-appropriate objectives” (Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultur, Wissenschaft und Kunst 2014, p. 15); concrete agreements are meant to increase commitment, and all “contractual partners” thus oblige themselves to implement the measures as a way of achieving certain goals (see e.g. Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 12). What the writings treating these meetings do not discuss is the ambivalence between children’s self-management

(e.g. in the form of self-assessment questionnaires used as part of learning development talks) and their being disciplined (Kelle 2009, p. 472; cf. Bröckling 2019).

(5) Framework conditions for “good family-school cooperation” – Creating resources and space for reflection, promoting inequality-sensitive organizational development

The cooperation between family and school comprises highly diverse situations, formats and constellations. In addition to legal, educational and profession-related framing, this includes the shaping of highly differentiated interactions, such as the initial contact with a school and subsequent acclimatization there; different forms of informal exchange between teachers and parents (e.g. spontaneous meetings); formalized forms of exchange (e.g. learning development meetings, daytime conferences with parents); forms of digital/written exchange (e.g. WhatsApp posts, information handouts, posters, school websites, photos/pictures); the shaping of transitions (e.g. transition to secondary school, to programs in the community or to after-school activities); individual and collective participation by parents at schools on different formal levels (e.g. parent representatives in the classroom, at schools and at the supra-school level); and home visits by teachers, along with involvement by parents in school activities / classroom instruction, for example during classroom visits (for an overview, see e.g. Epstein 2002).

Children are included in most of these constellations and situations in various ways – often because they are the subject of verbal or written discussion, as are their learning, development, competences, experiences, performance, behavior, etc. This also occurs because children themselves participate directly in these forms of exchange, e.g. as discussion partners or gatekeepers.

The relevant framework conditions must be closely considered if these forms of cooperation – some or all of them, or others in addition – are to be intensified and strengthened in the future, something that is also true due to the high expectations faced by actors in schools, e.g. the expectation that educational partnerships and more effective family-school interactions should be used to overcome disadvantages. The structural conditions for surmounting the everyday challenges inherent in more intensive family-school cooperation must be markedly improved – in terms of time, personnel, knowledge, skills, physical space, procedures, monitoring systems, etc. Which framework conditions are present, and which conditions would have to be present on an ongoing basis to meet the stringent, diverse and, at times, dilemmatic requirements?

Improved conditions are also warranted to the extent that binding policy guidelines have been put in place in individual German federal states which require educators to work with parents – and children – as partners. If, as shown, the focus is put on the trust between all participants, along with mutual appreciation, recognition, respect for one another, ongoing exchange, etc., then it is imperative that reliable, sufficient resources be made available on various levels (such as at individual schools, but also during the education and training of teachers) that can provide effective conditions allowing teachers, parents and children to actually “cooperate” and communicate.

There is also a need for the further refinement of forms of inequality-sensitive organizational development, for example as they relate to different methods

of participation, communication and interaction. These include three-way conferences and learning development talks, and approaches to involving student and parent representatives in school development processes. As part of observing and supporting school development processes and school experiments that target cooperation, among other topics, the focus should be put not only on the (potential) effects (for everyone), but also on differential effects and side effects. Moreover, resources must be made available to observe, evaluate and reflect on this in a process-oriented, systematic manner which also takes the various perspectives into account. Which individuals or groups have benefitted from specific changes made at a school, and which have not? What are the possible side effects of modules adopted and implemented as part of school development processes? How are those side effects observed, addressed and reflected on over time, and as the relevant framework conditions and individuals change?

(6) *Establishing and expanding reflexive social scientific and educational (accompanying) research*

Many of the problem-oriented interpretations of the findings presented in this research report, along with the challenges outlined here, illustrate how desirable and promising it would be to gain further theoretical and empirical insights into the complex interplay of school and family against the background of social inequalities. Obtaining such insights would require establishing and expanding *theoretically oriented, broad-based and, at the same time, reflexive social scientific and educational research* on family-school cooperation and on what is referred to in policy circles as educational partnerships.

Through studies on the processes, logic, experiences and perspectives of those involved on the micro-level of interactions and in specific organizations, this research can, *first*, provide an empirical foundation for the relevant expectations and educational and policy agendas.²⁸ To that end, prior studies can be fruitful that provide insights into the political contexts and origins of different methods for shaping family-school relations (Busse & Helsper 2007) and specific development trajectories, as can discourse-analytic studies that shed light on the interplay of academia, educational administration and school practice, for example in the context of school reform. Such studies can also be used to more closely analyze the positions, including those of children, evident in educational and policy writings, in handouts for teachers and parents, in education and training materials for educators, etc., and thus focus on the forms of knowledge that decision makers and teachers at schools generate or that are made available to them. Moreover, they can make it possible to interpret and classify these findings in terms of social theory.²⁹

28 These are evident in statements such as those maintaining students experience "increased motivation" in three-way conferences "since they are taken seriously" (Ministerium für Bildung 2018, p. 12). Such "factual" descriptions are of questionable value since their empirical foundations are unknown and undocumented, even if their seeming validity makes them very persuasive (for more on this, which is not only a problem related to educational policy documents, see e.g. Betz 2019).

29 During the preparation of this research report, it was already apparent that children and students are ascribed highly diverse positions in the relevant documents: Sometimes they are partners – e.g. educational, contractual, discussion, cooperation partners – sometimes students, sometimes children; sometimes the children's achievements at school and (future) economic successes are seen as the result of the partnerships between adults, among other factors (see e.g. Kultusministerkonferenz 2018a). For more on these diverse and fluid positionings within the partnership, which can also be found in policy and educational writings in the ECEC context, see Betz & Bollig 2019.

Second, it would be informative to conduct studies that account for the fact that *the* educational partnership and cooperation *per se* do not and cannot exist, studies that, instead, empirically examine different and very specific formats, offerings and programs that shape family-school relations in various ways. How do various approaches work, including over time and under different conditions – e.g. family classes, educational chains, parent mentoring projects, educational coaching and other variations on educational and parental support relating to primary school students? What logic informs both these approaches and other specific events, such as three-way talks and learning development meetings? Which good and bad experiences have participants had with them and how did they come about? Which parents, children, teachers and other educational professionals at schools and elsewhere make the added effort to get involved? Which want and are able to get involved? How exactly does this happen and what are the consequences?

The present analysis of children's positions and perspectives makes it possible, *third*, to show through one study how *varied and specific* the children's *contributions* are to shaping the family-school relationship, contributions that have often remained unseen until now, making it all the easier to ignore them: Their *forms of knowledge and actorship as "children"* need to be considered to a greater extent in conceptualizations of cooperation on the school and supra-school level (see Edwards & Alldred 2000) – for which differentiated empirical research findings could provide a basis. The empirical arguments described above for reconceptualizing quality standards and initiatives should also be seen in this context. This includes the further differentiation of *research on quality* to ensure it is sensitive to generational inequalities, heterogeneous perspectives and unequal positions and, at the same time, that it can and does account for the contribution made by (adult) researchers to the quality of schools and cooperation.

Among the research that would undoubtedly prove rewarding would be, *fourth*, studies exploring other overarching (new) social realities based on the interaction of students, teachers and parents at specific schools. It can be assumed that many as yet uninvestigated changes in how family-school relations are shaped are resulting from the three-way talks and learning development discussions described in this research report. Moreover, expanding on the findings of Bonanati (2018) and recalling the studies by Dannesboe (2016) and Kotthoff (2012) and the study *Children at the Crossroads of Opportunities and Barriers*, it can be assumed that not only will the positions of children change in and through these talks, so will ideas of what "good" parenting is when children are present at and involved in such meetings. The point is thus not to decide in an educational and policy context whether or not children should be present, and then to make an empirical foundation available for it; the point, instead, is that the entire construct is changing between family and school, childhood and adulthood (Fangmeyer & Mierendorff 2017), between children, teachers and parents, given (and as a result of) the requirement to implement these discussions in a number of German federal states. It would be necessary to observe and analyze these changes in the future as well, along with the question of whether and to what extent these relatively new discussion formats reveal as yet little considered ways of expecting, documenting and reporting on performance during the discussions, as well as prior to and following them.

Fifth, it would be instructive to initiate and expand studies that examine the (compensatory) effects of very different formats for cooperation – including as an

educational partnership – and interinstitutional communication between teachers, parents and children, thereby generating new and additional knowledge about the forms that disadvantages, inclusion and exclusion take, as well as mechanisms which reproduce inequality in specific circumstances. To that end, it would be necessary to investigate ambivalences and, in particular, evaluate them, answering questions such as: Which impacts – and side effects and unintended consequences – do different approaches to cooperation and their specific applications have for individuals and groups (e.g. disadvantaged children)?

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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. Her doctoral dissertation on *Ungleiche Kindheiten* (Unequal Childhoods), part of a social reporting project on children in Germany, was awarded the Prize for Young Academics by the University of Trier's Friends' Association. As director of the Office of Child and Youth Policy and the Office of the German Youth Advisory Board, she was active in policy consulting at the German Youth Institute. In 2010, she was awarded a Schumpeter Fellowship from the Volkswagen Foundation for her innovative EDUCARE research project. From 2010 to 2015, she was junior professor of Professionalization of ECEC and Primary Education at Goethe University in Frankfurt and at the LOEWE research center IDeA and, from 2015, professor of Childhood Studies and ECEC and Primary Education. Since 2018, she has been professor of General Educational Science with a focus on Childhood Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz. Her areas of specialization include educational and childhood research. Her work focuses on actors and institutions in (early) childhood and she investigates how difference and inequality are generated and reproduced. She analyzes the policy objectives of "good" childhood and "good" parenting, as well as pedagogical programs and their objectives, in addition to professional activities at educational institutions and in the social context. Since 2013, she has been a member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's expert panel on "Family and Education: Creating Child-Centered Policies." Since 2020, she has been director of the Institute of Educational Science at Johannes Gutenberg University.



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