


Home-School Partnership in Germany: Expectations, Experiences and Current Challenges

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Submitted: March 12, 2022 – Accepted: June 20, 2022 – Published: August 25, 2022

La partnership casa-scuola in Germania: aspettative, esperienze e sfide in atto

The paper focuses on parents and parental involvement in Germany as well as the challenges which became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. As has been the case in many other countries, the notion of parents as partners, is the focus of normative discussion about how to engage with parents. However, looking at the role actually played by parents in school settings, and the way school institutions interact with them, it can be seen that there is a difference. This paper describes: first, how the different roles that parents played were understood, prior to the pandemic; secondly, the part played by parents while schools were closed as a result of the pandemic; and thirdly, the strengthening of home-school partnerships in Germany, contrasting this with the roles parents take within them. The results are critically assessed under the broader perspective of de-familialism versus familialism.

Questo articolo si focalizza sui genitori e sul coinvolgimento parentale in Germania e sulle sfide emerse durante la pandemia da COVID-19. Come è accaduto in molti altri paesi, il concetto di genitori come partners è centrale nella discussione normativa concernente le modalità in cui ci si dovrebbe rivolgere ai genitori. Ciò nonostante, se si analizzano il ruolo ricoperto dai genitori a scuola, i modi usati per interpellarli, è possibile scorgere una differenza. In primo luogo, il contributo descrive come i differenti ruoli ricoperti dai genitori prima, della pandemia, vengono considerati. In secondo luogo, si prende in considerazione il ruolo giocato dai genitori durante la chiusura delle scuole dovuta alla pandemia. In terzo luogo, il rafforzamento della partnership scuola-famiglia in Germania viene confrontato con i ruoli assunti dai genitori all'interno di questo rapporto. Gli esiti di questa analisi sono poi valutati in modo critico nel quadro del continuum de-familialismo vs. familialismo.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; Parental involvement; Role of parents; Familialism; Germany.

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1. Introduction

The importance of parents for their children's academic success is evident across the world (OECD, 2018), not only for Germany (Wild, 2021). The meta-analysis by Barger *et al.* (2019) looks at different forms of parental involvement in children's schooling. Parental involvement *at home* includes discussions with children about school affairs and encouraging their learning processes, cognitive-intellectual support by reading, and visiting museums or libraries, or help with homework. With the exception of the last, the different ways of supporting a child, correlates positively with adjustment across the various dimensions. Children who receive support, benefit not only with academic achievement, their motivation and engagement in learning, but also with their social adjustment (e.g. social competencies), their emotional adjustment (e.g. self-esteem) and a decrease in delinquent behavior (e.g. smoking, aggression, destruction of property). Parental involvement *in schools* can include participation (e.g. volunteering in the classroom or field trips, communication with teachers) as well as governance (e.g. membership of school boards). Such an engagement has the potential to support their children's academic success as well, though to a smaller extent (Barger *et al.*, 2019, p. 872).¹ With regard to Germany, Wild (2021) summarizes such correlations for the latest Family Report for the German government.

As a result of this, the parent's low engagement was considered responsible for their children's school performance and educational disadvantages. Therefore, all over Europe policy programmes tend to engage parents more intensively to improve the educational outcomes of children (Byrne & Paseka, 2020). Having in mind a continuum between *familialism* and *de-familialism*, between family responsibility and public/state responsibility for learning results, such policies can be classified on the side of familialism, appearing across most country contexts. Simultaneously, in Germany there are tendencies towards de-familialism as well: A shared responsibility between family/parents and school is not only fixed by law, but also embedded in programmes and initiatives (see examples in Killus & Paseka, 2020). Where half-day schooling (from 8 am until 2 pm at the latest, with lunch at home or in special care facilities) was widespread, there is currently an expansion of all-day school, opening between 7 am until late afternoon and includes lunch and leisure activities. Additionally, all-day caring for younger children has been expanded further. Such tendencies can create tension and an ambivalence that can only be resolved by those involved.

Though parents are considered to be an essential factor in the learning of their children, parents were a marginal issue in the national political debate and programmatic papers (like those published by the KMK). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools, parents were "put in the spotlight" (Walper, 2021). In this paper we want to have a closer look at the familialism — de-familialism continuum and ask whether there is evidence for change. We start with a description of different roles parents took before the Covid-19 pandemic (2). We analyse representative surveys carried out during the pandemic by focusing on the challenges faced by schools, teachers and parents, and their mutual expectations (3). In Germany an increasing number of programmes are carried out to improve learning results for children, partly by involving parents and regarding their involvement as the key-issue. We ask which roles parents were given in such projects and programmes (4). In the conclusion we critically assess the German situation under the broader perspective of the idea of de-familialism versus familialism.

2. Roles of parents before the Covid-19 pandemic

According to Epstein *et al.* (2018) the relationship between the school and the family/parents can be described as separated or shared depending on who is responsible for the education of children. *Separated* responsibility means that parents are responsible for caring, schools for the education of the next generation. *Shared* responsibility means that both parents as well as schools, are responsible equally for caring and education.

In Germany the legislation is rather complex: On the one hand, Basic Law (Grundgesetz, 1949) declares in Article 6 (2) that "The care and upbringing of children is the natural right of parents and a duty primarily incumbent upon them". On the other hand, attending school is a statutory obligation for chil-

1. This result is in line with other meta-analyses (see Hillmayr *et al.*, 2021).

dren, and schools are under the supervision of the state (Article 7 (1)). As a consequence, parents and schools have to *share* their responsibilities to ensure the personal development of each child. This shared responsibility cannot be broken down into specific areas of responsibility, but rather should be accomplished through meaningful cooperation between parents and the school. Germany is a decentralized nation and the 16 federal provinces ('Länder') have considerable influence on legislation. Educational affairs are the responsibility of the federal provinces, which means: 16 different legislations exist that define the options for cooperation between parents and schools, and define a framework for their implementation. The main power for the setting of the agenda lies on the side of the schools, as they are given considerable scope to define and interpret the framework, as well as the amount and manner of participation and governance. The variability is quite large, so it is necessary to take a closer look at how this is put into practice, the documents produced, the specific communication, forms of cooperation for several opportunities (e.g. parental evenings, open house days, letters to parents) and the way parents are addressed there.

Looking into the practice, a number of attitudes towards parents and how to cooperate with them are evident (Killus & Paseka, 2020): Perceiving parents as *opponents* goes along with distancing and ignoring the parents' situation and wishes, e.g. when entering the school-building is only permitted at well-defined occasions like parental evenings. Regarding parents as *clients* means assessing parents as overburdened and in need of help, e.g. for supporting the learning processes of their children at home. In line with this, schools offer special information evenings or programmes for parents, where they can acquire specific skills. Viewing parents as *supporters*, means emphasizing the support parents are expected to provide: assisting and helping with homework, providing a good atmosphere at home, supplying the required materials or motivation for learning. Parents and families are seen as the "school support system" (Tyrell, 1987, p. 111) and schools take it for granted that parents are willing and able to fulfill such expectations independent of their socio-economic and ethnic background. In the early 1980's, such an intensive amount of work, predominately expected and performed by mothers was heavily criticized by feminist authors (e.g. Enders-Dragässer, 1982). Crozier (2000) elaborates: "The home is steadily being transformed into an educational setting" (p. 8). This would lead to the fracturing of family life and a change of responsibilities. Perceiving parents as *experts* implies a level of appreciation, that parents know their child very well and that their knowledge is important for planning and organizing learning processes. Perceiving parents as *actors* means recognizing their role in a democratic society, their rights within schools, e.g. on school boards, and their options to initiate and co-design school-development processes in the context of school-autonomy. Such an active and creative collaboration and participation of parents is possible in formal school boards but also in informal working-groups at school-level. Perceiving parents as *partners* means having a balance level of cooperation in mind, with a shared responsibility in several dimensions, emphasizing the education of children and young people. Due to the options for free school choice, schools are in constant competition with other schools to enroll as many pupils as possible. So, parents can also be perceived as *customers*, who have to be convinced to choose a particular school, and afterwards schools have to make sure that they are satisfied with the offers and the quality of teaching and learning. If this is the case parents might be 'advertising media' for other parents and a guarantee for being a well-labelled school. With this in mind, most schools would be interested in highly-educated, 'white', parents with a good income.

Aside from this, a Germany-wide and representative survey asked 3,000 parents how they view themselves in relation to their children's teachers and school (Killus & Paseka, 2020): Do parents see themselves as *partners*? (item: "Teachers indicate that they are interested in working with parents"). Do parents see themselves as *supporters*? (item: "I manage the homework"). And as *customers*, how satisfied are parents with what teachers and the school do for the academic success of their children? (item for satisfaction with teachers: "The teachers are competent"; item for satisfaction with school: "The school offers lots of activities for my child beyond teaching"). Carrying out a cluster analysis, three groups of parents were found: A first group of parents see themselves as partners and are very satisfied with the competency of teachers and the conditions at school (52 percent of all parents). A second group of parents feel less like a partner, are less satisfied with the teachers and the school, and feel they have to support their child because of failures in the teaching (23 percent). A third group of parents regard themselves as partners, and are highly satisfied with the teachers and the school, but refuse their role as supporters of

school (26 percent). The first group, tends to apply to parents of children at primary schools, the third group are parents whose children attend a gymnasium,² and the second group is made up of parents who feel that their child is overburdened with school. Correlations with the socio-economic or ethnic background of parents were not significant. The data show the simultaneity of existing expectations and the willingness of parents to accept and cope with these roles.

3. Schools and the Covid-19 pandemic: the situation and role(s) of parents during the shutdown of schools

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic immediately impacted the day to day life of all schools: they were forced to close and home-schooling became the norm. Neither schools and teachers, nor parents and pupils were prepared for this to happen. National guidelines on how to manage the challenges had to be interpreted quickly, different ways of coping had to be found, depending on the local circumstances, the managing of existing measures for digital learning and the age of pupils. The manner in which schools, teachers, parents and pupils handled the new situation, was very soon subject of research. In their meta-analysis, Helm, Huber and Loisinger (2021) included 97 research projects and surveys carried out in Germany, Austria and Switzerland: 60,468 pupils, 151,660 parents, 41,350 teachers and 2,339 headteachers were involved. Fickermann and Edelstein (2021) collected and described 84 research projects and surveys from these countries: 35 of them involved parents, 49 involved teachers, 32 also included the perspective of pupils and 16 asked others involved as well. The fact that parents and their situation have very much become the centre of the research has to be appreciated.

The number of people involved in these research projects and studies is very high, however, the quality of the data is limited, as the majority of the samples are not representative. Furthermore, for data collection, the use of online-tools dominated, that means that those parents who have no or limited access to digital media and the internet are underrepresented (e.g. low-income families or families with immigrant background). Therefore, non-privileged parents were not represented to a sufficient degree. For this paper we summarise the results with a focus on parents, their particular difficulties during the shutdown of schools (3.1) as well as the amount and quality of the cooperation between schools and parents (3.2). The meta-analysis of Helm, Huber and Loisinger (2021) will be the main source, with some additional more recent publications.

3.1. Situation and stress experienced by parents

Several longitudinal surveys focused on the stress parents experienced, after the schools were closed (summary in Bujard *et al.*, 2021, pp. 45–65): The data makes clear that the parents (mothers as well as fathers) complained about a higher level of stress than women and men in general. Their workload increased as they had to look after their children and help them in school-affairs much more than usual. To plan and ensure the compatibility between unpaid family work and paid work was a heavy burden for many parents, in the times of juggling a home-office and even more so, if they had to go to work. Short-time work facilitated the situation, but was often accompanied by financial losses. Although fathers admit that they spend more time on family affairs than before, mothers in general felt more of the responsibility (see also Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 272). Whether this might be an indicator for more traditional roles in the division of work in families or not is assessed ambivalently.

Bujard *et al.* (2021) emphasised that besides the gender factor, some other factors raised the amount, and the levels of stress as well, that of being a *single-parent*. Single-parents in work usually use childcare facilities and whole-day schools more frequently, but also informal options for caring (e.g. grandparents). Due to the closure of such facilities and the ordered reduction of contact with relatives, the burden to find arrangements for caring and being employed simultaneously was high (Zinn & Bayer, 2021). Another factor are *socio-economic conditions*: Low income is often combined with other risk factors like restricted housing conditions or insufficient technical equipment for home-office and home-schooling.

2. In Germany different forms of secondary schools after four years of primary school exist. The gymnasium is most highly ranked and appreciated by parents.

Being in part-time work or having lost a job means an increase in financial problems. Parents with a lower *education level* were more stressed by home-schooling than parents with a higher education level. *Working at home* enhances stress and increases the conflict between private and work life as well. In case of several risk factors, stress and exhaustion were even higher.

Summing up the results, the heterogeneity of parents is evident with a higher burden and stress for unprivileged groups of parents, but generally not for parents with an immigrant background. What are the consequences of such a high level of stress, and how does that affect attitudes toward home-schooling? Asking 2,581 parents with children in primary schools using a questionnaire for capturing emotional stress and anxiety as well as giving them the option to write about their experiences with home-schooling, 658 parents could definitively be assigned to one of the three following groups (Porsch & Porsch, 2022): The “burdened parents” express the excessive demands with home-schooling and partly fail to fulfill the expected role of ‘teacher’. They show a high level of anxiety and a low level of pleasure in supporting their children in their learning at home (413 parents, 63 percent). For the “relaxed parents” the challenges of home-schooling are easier to handle, they feel little stress and anxiety. Rather, they show more enthusiasm to learn with their children (87 parents, 13 percent). The “enthusiastic parents” find learning with their children at home relaxing and beneficial. They criticize school and the kind of learning there, so home-schooling is assessed as a welcomed alternative. Their enthusiasm is very strong, anxiety and stress level is very low (158 parents, 24 percent). Information about the socio-economic background of parents in these groups is not given.

3.2. Cooperation between school and parents

Cooperation between parents and school is highly appreciated and desired, as there is strong evidence that this has positive effects for the learning outcome of pupils in several areas (see Barger *et al.*, 2019). How did the cooperation between schools and parents during the time of home-schooling work? Two aspects will be described in more detail: parental support of children’s learning as well as the quantity and quality of contacts with school.

Parental support of children’s learning: A majority of parents are willing to support the learning of their children: they manage whether homework is completed, whether it is correct and they solve tasks together with their kids. Most parents admit that they supported their children more than usual. However, there are parents who complain that they don’t have enough time for such activities (between 25 and 66 percent depending on the research project according to Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 273). Parents of younger children are more involved than those of the elder children. The ability to support depends on several reasons: technical equipment, feeling capable and having subject as well as digital knowledge. Parents with lower education and an immigrant background admit that they sometimes feel helpless and do not know how to support their children. Between 3 and 21 percent of the parents report that they are not in possession of the necessary equipment. About one third of the parents admit that they feel helping and motivating their children causes great strain. That between 28 and 70 percent of the teachers assess the equipment in the children’s home as being insufficient is noteworthy, and also that two thirds of teachers think parents are overburdened with supporting their children (Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 274).

Contact between school and parents: Looking at the quantity of contact discrepancies between the assessment of parents and teachers is worthy of comment as well. Whereas the majority of teachers says that they were available for questions, at least half of the parents criticized the insufficient level of contact between them and teachers (Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 287). Concerning the quality of contact the data show different results: The information from schools communicated to parents, e.g. about Covid-19, the changing rules and regulations, is assessed very positively and sufficiently by parents. However, the concrete support for parents by schools and teachers is not only assessed lower, but ambivalently (see also Nusser *et al.*, 2021, p. 43). Concerning the amount of support by schools for parents, about half of the parents (40–50 percent) feel well supported as they were given advice on how to organize and structure learning at home, but 10 to 40 percent complained of not having an adequate level of support (Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 287). About 75 percent of parents do not recognize that their children get feedback from the teachers and that their homework is supervised. As a result, they think that many tasks are being delegated to them. The teachers assess their work differently:

nearly all of them assert that they supervise the learning of their pupils (Helm, Huber & Loisinger, 2021, p. 280).

3.3. Summary: Role of parents during home-schooling

Summing up the research results on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, some tendencies become apparent: (1) Parents were very stressed by school closures as they had to think about new solutions to arrange family work and paid work. Mothers were more stressed than fathers as the mothers' role in childcare and home-schooling is significantly higher than that of fathers. However, the part of fathers increased as well when comparing the data before and during the school closures. So, there has been a tendency for *re-traditionalism* as well as for *finding new forms* for family-life. (2) The role of parents as *supporters* for school increased enormously: Though the conditions at home were not the best in all households, parents helped and encouraged their children a great deal independently of their socio-economic and educational background. However, they felt not enough support was provided by schools and teachers. This is problematic, because the support of parents by teachers and school obviously has positive effects on parents and children: Sander, Schäfer and van Ophuysen (2021, p. 437) found that the characteristics of not only their own child (like age, gender, school level, problems with learning) are essential for the extent of engagement of parents while the school was closed, but also the viewed support from the school for their child as well as for them. Wild (2021) summarizes former research, saying that a high quality in the cooperation and communication with parents, correlates with the better learning results of their children. (3) Teachers assess their efforts more positive than parents. They think they did a lot for maintaining learning and schooling whereas parents perceive their own effort very highly and many of them feel exhausted. Such a discrepancy between teachers and parents can be interpreted as a lack of conversation and exchange about experiences. (4) Finally, it has to be admitted that the studies on which the summary is based address parental heterogeneity to a quite small degree or provide very inconsistent results.

4. Challenges in the time after the Covid-19 pandemic: action programmes

The German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Seniors Citizens, Women and Youth launched the action programme "Catching up after Corona for Children and Young People" giving financial support in the sum of two million Euro for 2021 and 2022. The money is partly distributed directly, and also partly by supporting the 16 federal provinces to plan, organize and carry out adequate activities with the aim of overcoming the perceived negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children as fast as possible.

The programme includes activities for very young children (elementary education), families, children and youth (sport and leisure activities, learning in school) (BMFSFJ, 2022). The programmes for schools and learning support vary according to the initiatives prepared in the different federal provinces. In this paper some of these programmes will be described in order to have an impression of what happens at present. Guiding questions are: Who is made responsible for the learning of children in such projects? Who are the projects for and in what way?

The programmes have short names using metaphors that symbolize a positive mood: "Learning with a tailwind" in Baden-Wuerttemberg, "Arriving & Catching up" in North Rhine-Westphalia, "build.BRIDGES.together" in Bavaria or "Connection", the Hamburg mentoring programme. Looking closer into these programmes they have some characteristics in common: All programmes involve cooperation between schools, the regional institutions for teacher education and school-development, and partly universities or foundations; additional staff are recruited (especially retired teachers and student teachers) and briefly prepared for supporting pupils with learning, social and emotional difficulties; most of the support happens in additional courses in the afternoon or during holidays (e.g. summer schools) with the aim to raise the pupils' level of knowledge. There are some aspects that are striking: As far as can be viewed on their homepages, the support is given in addition by external

persons, but not integrated into regular teaching times with teachers. And: Parents are no longer involved.

On one hand, this can be assessed as positive as the tendency towards a re-familialism has stopped and schools (with external support) resume their primary responsibility for the learning of the pupils. On the other hand, in doing this the expertise of parents developed while home-schooling, seems to be disregarded and no longer considered to be helpful for the further development of their children. It seems very much like going back to the time before the pandemic in which a punctual and deficit-oriented communication between parents and schools dominated, and a mutually agreed partnership of trust was far from being a matter of fact (Sliwka & Klopsch, 2020, p. 220).

However, an improvement of the cooperation between parents and schools — especially after the experiences with home-schooling — seems absolutely necessary. The debate on how to establish a respectful cooperation in Germany is still quite young, when comparing the situation with other countries, e.g. the USA where standards for a respectful home-school partnership were created by the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA, 2008). These standards were disseminated and are widespread in schools. For Germany a group of experts discussed these standards and adopted them for the situation in Germany (Wild, 2021). The result: “Quality criteria for home-school cooperation” (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland, 2013). To encourage schools to create a partnership between parents and the school, and to go beyond mere rhetoric, the expert group defined four main quality criteria, including detailed descriptions and examples: welcoming all families into the school community, diverse and respectful communication, educational cooperation and parents’ participation. The quality criteria make clear that parents should be taken seriously as experts, actors and partners of school combined with a positive attitude towards the diversity of family backgrounds.

The main challenge currently seems to be getting parents back on board in the time after the Covid-19 pandemic: to appreciate their experiences, to welcome them as *experts*, *actors* and *partners* in school-development processes to improve the learning experience of children. We therefore chose two long-term programmes to give contrasting examples of how this might be done, looking critically at the role of parents and how they are addressed, but also at the role of schools: the LIFE-programme to improve reading literacy in primary schools (Bonanati et al., 2021) with a focus on parents and their competencies and the BiFoKi-programme for improving the cooperation between the pedagogical staff and parents in inclusive schools (Wild, 2021) with a focus on school with its various actors. Both programmes have been at least partly evaluated.

4.1. LIFE (“Lesen in Familie erleben”, “Experience Reading in Families”)

The LIFE-Programme is part of the Family-Literacy-Programme (FLY) that was developed to involve parents in the reading and writing processes of their children in primary schools. LIFE was planned at the University of Paderborn for many years (2013–2019) and evaluated by a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups (Bonanati et al., 2021). The programme includes six meetings at school in the first year of schooling. Parents together with their children take part to experience various ideas to start and begin to have pleasure with reading (e.g. treasure hunt for letters in the school-building). LIFE aims to raise the parents’ expertise in reading literacy and for developing their children’s enjoyment and skills for reading, but they also get an idea of how language and reading is taught in school. The feeling of being a *client* and in need of help is avoided, by concentrating on the learning of the child. Having contact with teachers in the afternoon, a positive atmosphere can be given the chance to grow, separate from the more formal meetings. Parents are seen as becoming *experts* for strategies to improve reading and as *partners* in the endeavor of being a support to their children. Nevertheless, their role of *supporters* for teachers and their teaching is evident as well. By sharing knowledge and efforts to improve children’s reading literacy, a feeling of what ‘shared responsibility’ could mean might occur. Participating parents may also benefit from the experience, increasing their self-confidence.

The accompanying research showed small positive effects directly after the programme, as well as half a year later: Parents of the experimental group admit more often that they talk to their children about what they read, than parents of the control group. The children involved report that parents read with them more often after the programme. Compared to other studies in German-speaking countries (Villiger *et al.*, 2012), the effects of the LIFE-programme were rather small. The authors explain the

smaller effects with the rather broad range of topics covered, the small number of events with relatively long-time intervals, and the support of groups, which often shows smaller effects compared to individual one-to-one support. Furthermore, it must be noted that the results — similar to the results from other programmes — concern in particular parents with a higher level of education, as the drop-out rate of parents with a lower level of education was much higher within the accompanying research project.

LIFE has advantages for use in schools. Due to the broad and low-threshold range of topics, many parents are addressed, and events can be easily integrated into the school and family calendar. In addition to promoting parental support, LIFE was also intended to strengthen cooperation between home and school by functioning as a door opener to involve parents in educational processes from the beginning of the first school year. However, the possible strengthening of cooperation was not the subject of the accompanying study.

4.2. BiFoKi (“Biefelder Fortbildungskonzept zur Kooperation in inklusiven Schulen”, “Bielefeld Training on Cooperation in Inclusive Schools”)

This is exactly where the second programme, BiFoKi, comes in (Wild, 2021). In this programme, training for school boards, pedagogical staff and parents was developed and carried out at 28 inclusive secondary and comprehensive all-day schools in North Rhine-Westphalia. These are schools with a significant proportion of pupils with a non-German mother tongue, with special educational needs or with refugee experience. The programme aimed to show these schools ways to a high-quality educational partnership with parents. In inclusive all-day schools, cooperation with parents is basically a joint task with general teachers, special educators and school social workers and should therefore be thought of as multi-professional. In order to support multi-professional teams at schools in the further development of their work with parents without ‘patronizing’ them, four interlinked offers were made: (1) At the beginning of grade 5, i.e. after the change from four-year primary school to secondary school, *workshops* were held with the pedagogical teams responsible for grade 5, which had just formed and met the ‘new’ parents. Within these workshops, an assessment of parental involvement was done on the basis of quality criteria for home-school cooperation developed by a group of experts (Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland, 2013), views were exchanged, and possible solutions were developed. (2) A *kick-off event* addressed to the school board of each participating school, served to familiarize them with the aims and contents of the training and to solicit support for the wishes and needs of the pedagogical teams involved, but also of the parents. (3) During the workshops, *parents’ forums* took place in which parents of fifth grade pupils were asked to what extent they see the above-mentioned quality criteria realized and where there is still a need for improvement. The common goal of the on-site events (workshops and parents’ forums) was to establish next steps and partial goals based on the assessments of pedagogical staff and parents. (4) A few months after these events, *inter-school network meetings* were held, attended by the school boards and pedagogical teams involved of the participation schools, to provide an opportunity to share and learn from each other.

Whether the participating schools succeeded in establishing a high-quality educational partnership remains to be seen in the results of the evaluation (surveys of school boards, pedagogical teams, parents, and pupils). Interesting for this paper, which focuses on questions of familialism or de-familialism, are findings that were mainly gained through field observations during the training, and which at least partially indicate different ideas of responsibility, cooperation practices as well as patterns of perception and interpretation (Wild, 2021, pp. 486–493). This is shown by the following selected results: (1) It became apparent that the schools’ reasons for participating in the programme were very different. While some schools hoped for impulses for a high-quality educational partnership, other schools wanted advice on how to get all parents engaged in activities that can definitely be understood as supporter-services (e.g. following up on messages, checking school bags or support in school activities). (2) At the same time, committed parents — across all classes — (also) expect to be addressed by the schools as supporters. The requests for improvement they express are aimed at being able to better meet the expectations of the school staff, which are apparently considered legitimate. (3) Contrary to widespread judgements about the difficulty of reaching certain parents, it turns out that parents with refugee or immigration experiences were well represented among the visitors of the parents’ forums, which suggests a high willing-

ness to cooperate. However, these parents felt less well ‘picked up’ by the schools than parents without refugee or immigration experiences. (4) The pedagogical teams involved in the schools agreed that cooperation with parents was a challenge. While some team members signalled their willingness to critically rethink their previous practice and showed an appreciative view of parents, other team members saw the term ‘challenge’ as a paraphrase of ‘impositions’ resulting in personal burdens. (5) It was also striking that experiences with some ‘difficult’ parents shape the view of parents as a whole, so that parents who want to contribute constructively are lost from view. Teachers tended to complain more often about ‘difficult’ parents than special educators and school social workers. Teachers also considered school and family to be somewhat more separate spheres than the two comparison groups. Consequently, the perception and description of parents also reflect professional perceptions and divergences.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we analyzed the role of parents before, within and after the Covid 19-pandemic. We started with a description of different roles and the underlying national legislation in Germany which proclaims a shared responsibility between school and parents. As Germany has a decentralized political system with much power given to the 16 federal provinces, the rules and recommendations differ in detail. Within each federal province the schools are given a quite large autonomy concerning how to design and shape their cooperation with parents (Killus & Paseka, 2000, pp. 30–47). In general, a mixture between *familialism* and *de-familialism* describes the relationship between families and schools in Germany. Schools extended their offer for caring and education by offering all-day education. This shows a tendency towards de-familialism. At the same time parents were still made responsible for learning results, behavioral problems, and the emotional development of each child in their role as *supporters* of school. This shows a tendency towards familialism. The cooperation between family and school could be described as predominately deficit-oriented if problems with learning and/or the child occurred. A number of schools are certainly trying to establish a more welcoming atmosphere and new forms of contact emphasizing parents as experts, partner and actors (see summary of initiatives in Hillmayr *et al.*, 2021), but such efforts cannot be assessed as nationwide (Sliwka & Klopsch, 2020).

Throughout the Covid 19-pandemic, the tendency towards *familialism* was enhanced as the children were not able to attend school. Parents were expected to know what to do and to take over responsibility for learning at home, regardless of their individual situation and their personal competencies. Their role of *supporter* was intensified. They received information about the current situation, but they missed specific support on how to teach their children whereas the teachers tended to think that they gave enough support.

When the schools opened again, programmes to support children with low learning results were established with the support of external partners. Parents were totally neglected in the development of such programs although they probably had gained an enormous amount of expertise for teaching and learning within those last months. This strict tendency towards *de-familialism* therefore seems quite astonishing.

But which programmes might help to find a good and respectful cooperation between parents and school, not falling into the trap between addressing parents as supports and clients on the one side but also addressing them as experts, actors and partners on the other side? Two contrasting programmes were presented: The LIFE-Programme focuses more on the role of parents as *supporters*, being able to become *experts* by acquiring knowledge about reading literacy and by doing so support the teachers as well as their own child. However, a further aim was to establish a non-deficit dialogue concerning a specific subject (reading literacy) (Bonanati *et al.* 2021). The BiFoKi-Programme involves more actors: members of the school board, the pedagogical staff (general teachers, special educators, school social workers) as well as parents. In a cooperative way, they had the chance to establish a welcoming atmosphere in their school and perceiving themselves as *partners* and *experts* in different fields. Though this focus the results show that parents nevertheless feel at least they are *supporters* of teachers as they expect this is wanted from them. Teachers are partly driven by previous (problematic) experiences, practices and views that prevent them from breaking new ground: For example, they address parents primarily as

supporters, perceive cooperation with parents as a burden or project their experiences with some 'difficult' parents to all parents.

Crossing the bridge between familialism and de-familialism seems a difficult task, following the aim of a shared responsibility between parents and schools. The traditional and well established 'grammar of schooling' (Sliwka & Klopsch, 2020) was challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic and as a result, new ways for a cooperation between parents and schools have to be found. What is still a lack in research and programmes: how to involve parents more strongly as partners, experts, and actors and how to reach non-privileged families without viewing them as clients. This still remains an unresolved problem.

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