"In Parents' School Experience, the Teacher was just Lecturing at the Front". School-Family Partnerships in Schools with Personalized Learning Concepts

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Our study examines communication and cooperation between schools that have implemented personalized learning concepts and the families of their students. The study forms part of a longitudinal mixed-methods research project (2012–2015, supported by the foundation Mercator Switzerland). Conducting a qualitative content analysis of interviews and strategic documents (N = 12 schools), we developed an analytic instrument, applying a semi-deductive procedure. It is based on research on school-family partnerships and consists of five communication and cooperation structures (a) channels of two-way information exchange and cooperation; b) information flow from schools to parents; c) parent events; d) parent volunteering; e) parent involvement in decision-making) and five content and object areas i) psychological, pedagogical, and school concepts; ii) understanding families; iii) learning and instruction; iv) learning progress and achievement; v) problems, conflicts). The linkage between the structures and the content of the interactions led to three paradigmatic types of schools. Type 1: Informal communication and cooperation; Type 2: Reactive communication and cooperation; Type 3: Strategic communication and cooperation. The results indicate that it can be particularly advantageous to center the communication on student progress, to focus parent events on education-related topics, and to give the parents a voice in decision-making processes.

Keywords: School-family partnerships, personalized learning, school improvement, communication, case study.

Introduction

In recent years, schools have globally been undergoing structural, organizational, and curricular changes. On the one hand, and more than ever before, school effectiveness is measured in terms of standardized outcomes at different levels of the education system, ranging from classroom instruction to school organization and institutional or educational policy settings (OECD, 2014). On the other hand, the increasingly heterogeneous student and parent body requires schools and teachers to adapt and personalize

(Murphy, Redding, & Twynman, 2016) their instruction so as to meet the diverse needs in the classroom and to address families with a wide variety of cultural and social backgrounds. Policy makers expect schools to provide a high degree of transparency while many parents want to make sure that their children get the best education possible. Alongside comparable developments in other countries (OECD, 2006), a number of public and private schools in Switzerland have recently been shifting their "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454) towards personalized learning (Stebler, Pauli, & Reusser, 2017, in press) and forms of "differentiated instruction" (Tomlinson, 2014) to accommodate the increasingly diverse needs of their heterogeneous

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learning groups in an adequate way. In Switzerland, unlike the development in many other countries, this pedagogical innovation rests on bottom-up intiatives.

Against this background, our paper presents selected results of the longitudinal research project "perLen" ("Schools with personalized learning concepts in heterogeneous learning groups", see www.perlen.uzh.ch) (Stebler, Pauli, & Reusser, in press). Our study pursues the question of how the implementation of new learning concepts affects school-family relationships: how do these innovative schools communicate and cooperate with their students' parents? Our aim is, first, to learn more about how schools that provide instructional environments that considerably differ from traditional classroom settings structure their interactions with the families and, second, to gain an insight into their strategies for convincing the parents of their pedagogical concepts and their novel approach to teaching and learning. Knowledge of these strategies contributes to identifying the factors that are crucial to building fruitful school-family partnerships and to impart successful approaches to a wider educational audience.

Theoretical Framework and Current State of Research

The complex reality of school-family relationships is an essentially multidisciplinary matter and can be analyzed from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, political studies, education, and instruction as well as from an interdisciplinary angle (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990, 1993, p. 268). In educational research, the study of such relationships is rooted in democratic thought (Dewey, 1966) and builds on school effectiveness research according to which education is a shared interest and a joint responsibility of school, family, and the community with the overall aim of promoting learning outcomes (Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2011b).

Several theoretical models for investigating school-family relationships in educational institutions have been proposed so far (Ditton, 2009). Educational sociology, for instance, makes use of social ecological theories (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1990, 2001) that allow them to integrate the aspects of school effectiveness and socialization (McNeal, 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner, the family as the most proximal context of socialization at the micro-level and the

school at the meso-level are the two environments for cognitive and emotional development in which children spend most of their time during compulsory education (Bronfenbrenner, 1990, pp. 107–108). By introducing the model of overlapping spheres of influence on child learning (family, school, and community), Epstein (2011) supplemented Bronfenbrenner's static conception with the component of dynamic flexibility. The extent of the overlap hinges on variables relating time and on characteristics of the different spheres. This means that the overlap of influence alters relative to the child's age and grade (Johnson, 1991). Besides time, Epstein's model also incorporates the powers of experience, philosophy, and culture as characteristics of the family, the school, and the community (Epstein et al., 2009, pp. 151–152) that affect the overlap of the spheres as well. In practice, the overlap manifests itself in interactions between school, family, and community and can be influenced both intentionally and unintentionally (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 151–152). Owing to the characteristics of the study and the data base, our paper focuses on the interactions between school and family, specifically attending to the school's point of view.

Sociologists and educational sociologists, especially in Anglo-American research, have been studying the effects on academic achievement that result from the interaction between school and family (understood as different developmental settings) for decades. Referring to their findings, they have emphasized the importance of building strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities (Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010; Crozier, 1998; Deslandes, 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 1998; Jeynes, 2011a; Mapp, 2012; Sheldon, 2005, 2009). The research conducted so far has identified the following features of school-family partnerships that tend to have positive effects on student achievement: school and parents share the responsibility for student learning (Epstein & Salinas, 2004); communication between educators and parents focuses on the development of cognitively stimulating learning environments (Stange, 2012); parents are involved in the learning processes of their children, and the school supports parents in facilitating their children's learning at home (Jeynes, 2012; Sheldon, 2009).

In Switzerland, the educational system has traditionally separated the responsibilities of families and schools: the family was usually considered responsible for childcare and

upbringing whereas the school was mainly in charge of formal education (Ho & Vasarik Staub, in press). At present, the relationship between school and family is subject to local educational laws, but it is seldom regulated to a far-reaching extent.

In the early 1990s, it proved to be increasingly difficult to separate school and home when it came to educational responsibilities (Fend, 2009; Neuenschwander, 2005). The society had become more complex as a consequence of immigration and women's evolving roles in the domains of family and work, which affected all parties involved. Since then, the increasingly heterogeneous society has been exerting pressure on school structures and teaching practice, calling for reforms, which has also led to high demands on the cooperation between teachers and parents (Reusser, Stebler, Mandel, & Eckstein, 2013; Niggli, Trautwein, Schnyder, Lüdke, & Neumann, 2007; Vasarik Staub, 2015). Similar to the developments in other countries, one reason for involving the parents more actively in school-related activities and decisions than in the past can be found in the effort to reduce the effects of social inequality on education (Crozier, 1998; Hartas, 2014). Some school boards have issued regulations that encourage schools to establish advisory boards and representative bodies. Most schools have implemented such forms of parent involvement although at the same time policymakers often emphasize that parent bodies have no influence on the actual pedagogical work. As research into the Swiss situation shows, there is no consolidated practice regarding strategic partnerships between schools and families that goes beyond the elementary requirements of the regulatory structures (Egger, Lehmann, & Straumann, 2014, 2015; Ho &Vasarik, in press).

In recent years, a number of projects have been carried out in the German-speaking countries with the aim of supporting schools and educators in establishing collaborative relationships with families and parents (Bosch Stiftung, 2016; Keck & Kirk, 2001; Oechslein et al., 2016; Ostermann, 2016; Sacher, 2005, 2008, 2014, 2016; Stiftung Bildungspakt Bayern, 2014; Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland, 2013; Wild & Lorenz, 2010). Like in several other countries, studies relating to Switzerland indicate that although education policy supposes schools as institutions to take the responsibility for school-family partnerships, it is mostly the individual teacher who bears this responsibility in practice (Karlsen Baeck, 2010;

Egger et al., 2015). Nevertheless, teachers are often reluctant to invite parents to enter into an open dialogue on education, often because of the traditional separation of schools and families mentioned above (Deslandes, Barma, & Morin, 2015; Karlsen Baeck, 2010). This is one reason why teachers may lack experience of how to involve families in a constructive way, which may cause feelings of stress when they communicate with parents (Egger et al., 2015). Moreover, teacher training programs do not always prepare preservice teachers for establishing and maintaining relationships with the parents of their students (Barge & Loges, 2003; Sauer, 2015). In summary, the rhetoric of policymakers emphasizes shared responsibilities and partnership building, but research shows that this is not common practice in real school life (Deslandes et al., 2015).

The perLen Project: Swiss Schools with Personalized Learning Concepts

In order to learn more about how interactions with families can be established in a strategic way, we are currently looking at Swiss schools that work with personalized learning concepts and whose pedagogical ideas and practices therefore often differ considerably from what the parents of the students have experienced during their own schooldays. From the perspective of systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1990) and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2011), innovative teaching and learning practices challenge the common understanding of education of both schools and parents. This may cause mistrust and reservation, which, in turn, may jeopardize the success of reforms. In what follows, we present results from a longitudinal research project on schools that have implemented personalized learning concepts, referred to as "perLen schools" (Stebler et al., 2017, in press).

To be better able to respond to the needs of the increasingly diverse groups of students and their families, a number of (public and private) Swiss schools have decided to take an alternative approach to teaching and learning. Personalized learning environments focus on the individual students and consider them to be active agents of their own learning. The educators tailor learning opportunities to the students' needs, abilities, and interests, give them voice and choice, encourage self-regulated learning processes and foster the development of both their personal and subject-

specific skills. Furthermore, the teachers co-design the learning environments together with the individual students, which leads to varying objectives, contents, methods, and learning pace within the same group of learners (Murphy et al., 2016; Reusser, 2015; Stebler et al., 2017; USDOE, 2010).

The implementation of personalized learning requires an orchestration of suitable teaching methods like differentiated instruction, individualized learning, cooperative learning, team-teaching, coaching, and individual learning support, most of which stand in stark contrast to the methodology of traditional classroom instruction (Tomlinson, 2014). Although the learning environments developed and implemented in individual schools may differ considerably, a shared characteristic of all of them is the reorganization of learning groups (e.g., mixed age-groups), teaching teams, and schedules. A further commonality manifests itself in architectural changes to school buildings and study rooms (e.g., open space instead of classrooms) (Stebler et al., 2017).

The primary objective of the perLen study is to investigate the teaching and learning culture in perLen schools, their pedagogical concepts, the professional demands on teachers as well as the effects of personalized learning on student performance. The total sample consists of 65 schools from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, 12 of which were selected for in-depth case studies (10 public and 2 private schools). Since there is no free school choice in Switzerland, the demographic composition of the perLen schools does not fundamentally differ from the population of regular schools. The data collected for the case studies include semi-structured group interviews and one-on-one interviews with teachers and school principals at three points in time between 2013 and 2015 (n = 41), strategy documents of the participating schools, and publicly available information (websites, newspaper articles, media reports, etc.).

Research Questions, Methods, and Data Analysis

In order to gain a thorough understanding of partnership building in the educational context, we analyzed interactions between schools and families as well as between teachers and parents at different levels. Generally speaking, collaborative partnerships are likely to develop on the basis of interactions in which all the parties involved share mutual goals in a certain social situation (Jonas, Stroebe, & Hewstone, 2007; Krapp & Weidenmann, 2001). They evolve from acts of reciprocal support, planned communication processes, feedback processing, and constructive discussions about problems or differences (Hacker, 1998; Spiess, 1988). Adopting this assumption, we focus on the structures and the contents of the communication and cooperation between school and family. Owing to the data available, our analysis is limited to the perspective of the schools, however. The research questions we addressed are the following:

1. How do schools with personalized learning concepts get the parents of the students to understand and support their innovative pedagogical concepts and educational practices?

2. What communication and cooperation strategies do school principals and teachers use in interactions with the parents?

3. What are the objects (topics, questions, activities) and contents of their communication and cooperation?

4. What makes school-family relationships in innovative educational environments effective in terms of trusting partnerships and communication/cooperation that centers on student learning?

The analysis was carried out in a four-step process: i) identification of suitable units of analysis; ii) qualitative content analysis of interview data; iii) case analysis and type construction; iv) evaluation of the results from both the content analysis and the case analysis.

In the first step, we determined the units for the qualitative content analysis by applying a basic coding procedure. To this end, we imported sections of interview transcripts and additional documents into the MAXQDA software for qualitative data analyses (MAXQDA, 1989–2016). Making reference to both the main interview questions (deduction) and the statements of the interviewees (induction), a trained team of researchers first coded the transcripts of semi-structured group interviews with teachers into large chunks of relevant information concerning school-family relationships. For testing the reliability (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2013), several coders coded the same transcripts and achieved an inter-coder reliability of 90%. The interviews with school principals were structured with the help of the lexical search function of MAXQDA (1989–2016). We then refined the

results of the search by selecting those text passages that were pertinent to the research questions. In total, the relevant interview data amounted to about 230 pages of text. Besides, also the complementary data sources (strategic documents of the schools and publicly accessible information) were edited for the case analyses.

The second step first consisted in a qualitative content analysis for setting up a category system by means of a semi-deductive procedure (Kohlbacher, 2006; Kuckartz, 2016). Second, the reliability of the coding was tested with the help of the MAXQDA software for qualitative data analyses. We thereafter refined the coding in an inductive procedure until we had generated highly distinct categories. The process was precisely documented in a code manual in which all codes were descriptively defined and illustrated by a typical example. Third, all data were coded in accordance with the newly established category system. So as to test the reliability of the coding, 10% of the data were inter-coded.

The third step was dedicated to the case studies and made use of type-building methods (Kelle & Kluge, 2010; Kluge, 2000; Kohlbacher, 2006; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). First, we described each school (n = 12) on the basis of the coded interview data. The MAXQDA software "Code Relations Browser" (CRB) revealed relations between codes. This allowed us to see which of the communication and cooperation codes were associated with which content and object areas in which schools and to what extent.

Parallel to the comparison of the relations between the codes, we wrote case summaries for each of the 12 schools that focused on the research questions pursued in this paper. These case summaries were based on school-internal and publicly available documents and followed a fixed pattern. They included general school information on the ownership (private/public), cantonal/communal setting (legislation and other geopolitical factors, e.g. rural/urban), size, conceptual information on the reasons for developing personalized learning concepts, membership in networks of innovative schools, and elements/summaries of the pedagogical concepts. Thereafter, we compared and generalized the cases by identifying their commonalities and differences according to the above-mentioned criteria. By doing so, we were able to characterize several school types that were distinct with respect to different dimensions (e.g., rural schools with external/administrative reasons

for reforming their instructional concepts; private schools with visionary leaderships, etc.).

The fourth step consisted in an analysis of the contextual links between these types. For this purpose, we scrutinized the matrix with the code relations as well as the case summaries. This procedure resulted in the identification and characterization of three paradigmatic school types so that all twelve schools could be assigned to one of the three types. We then described one sample case of each type in full detail, combining all data sources and results of the preceding steps.

Results

Structures and Contents of Communication and Cooperation Between Schools and Families

The semi-deductive coding process (second step of the analysis) resulted in two superordinate categories with several subcategories. The first main category includes structures of communication and cooperation between schools and parents. This category contains interview statements concerning the organizational framework that regulates interactions at the individual and at the institutional level. As regards the individual level, we coded interactions between a teacher and a parent or between a teacher, a child, and a parent, for instance. At the institutional level, the coding related to interactions between school management/principal and families in general or between teacher(s) and the parent body of a group of learners (see also Epstein, 2011, p. 32; Epstein et al., 2009, p. 151). The codes of this category can be divided into five subcategories:

a) Channels of two-way information exchange and cooperation (individual and institutional level): exchange allows both teachers and parents to impart information and ask questions related to students, instruction, and school (Epstein, 2011, pp. 395–396; Epstein et al., 2009, pp. 16, 154); telephone and e-mail contact; teacher-parent grade conferences; continuous dialog via a student learning diary that parents check every day; home visits, etc.

b) School's outgoing information flow to the families (institutional level): structures of written, audiovisual, and media communication involving the school as an institution and the parent body in general: e.g., "open school policy" (unlimited visiting options for parents), information events at the school, interim and end-of-year progress reporting; homework calendars; newsletters;

electronic/online databases; audiovisual communication (photos, videos of children in learning situations or classroom scenes, school website, promotional school videos), etc. It is characteristic of these structures that the school initiates the communication and does expect the families to respond actively or to provide direct feedback.

c) Parent events (institutional level): open-house days/weeks; organized visits to the classroom; presentations or discussions on a specific topic; informal meetings with the aim of acquainting the parents with the teachers; community events; workshops for parents; parent training, etc. These structures typically relate to general contents and address the parents collectively rather than individual families.

d) Parents volunteering at school (individual or institutional level): assistance in classroom instruction; parents supporting the teacher(s) in extra-curricular activities (camps, excursions); organization and realization of non-pedagogical events in the school community (for teachers or other families).

e) Parent involvement in decision-making (institutional level): communication and cooperation structures concerning strategic school management and development; legally set structures such as parent board or compulsory teacher-parent conferences; structures developed by schools in order to involve the parent representatives in decision-making processes, e.g. integrated parent action groups, feedback groups, formal and informal as well as ad-hoc parent interest groups.

The second category includes content and object areas that are dealt with in interactions between school and families. Statements that were assigned to one of the five subcategories include the following topics, questions, and general content areas:

a) Psychological, pedagogical and school concepts: development of an effective learning environment at school and at home; school transitions; educational paths; career planning; learning support at home; child upbringing and child/adolescent development; health; safety; nutrition; media; pedagogical concepts (personalized learning, core and school curriculum, teaching and learning practices); homework culture.

b) Understanding families (see also Epstein et al., 2009): teachers' interest in their students' family background and children's wellbeing (see also Egger et al., 2015), e.g., interactions between families from different cultures and schools/teachers; addressing of all parents, including families that are difficult to reach; representation of all parents in decision-making.

c) Learning and instruction: curriculum; weekly or annual learning plans; homework; tutoring, etc.

d) Learning progress and achievement: daily or weekly progress reporting; progress reporting at key transition points (transition from primary to secondary school, transition to vocational education); student achievements; subject-specific and cross-curricular skills; potentials of students as regards transitions and career planning.

e) Problems and conflicts: problems and conflicts between teachers or schools and parents or parent groups; misunderstandings, disagreements, arguments, disputes over various issues. This category contains further subcategories that distinguish between the topics of the disagreements: pedagogical concepts/instruction; responsibilities of the school management; professionalism of teachers; responsibilities of teachers and/or parents.

In brief, the category system provides an analysis instrument that makes it possible to describe how schools communicate and cooperate with their students' families and, at the same time, to determine the content of these structures.

School Types

As mentioned in connection with the explanation of the fourth step of the analysis above, we combined the evaluation of the coding from the qualitative content analysis (interview data) with the case summaries (school-internal and publicly available information). This led to the following insights.

The twelve schools are located in five different cantons of German-speaking Switzerland, and they pursue different policies on partnerships with parents that range from brief recommendations concerning the exchange of information to extensive regulations of school-parent communication in large communities with several schools. Seven schools are relatively small in size (60 to 150 students) while the five other schools are considered big in Swiss dimensions (165 to 455 students). Furthermore, two schools are primary schools (grades 1–8, starting with two years of kindergarten), nine schools are secondary

schools (grades 9–11), and one school integrates primary and secondary education.

In half of the schools, the reasons for developing personalized learning concepts rest on administrative or external factors. In one case, for instance, a local community had to cut the budget substantially so that the school community had to find a way of increasing the size of the classes and saving resources. The solution eventually consisted in team-teaching and mixed age-groups. In another example, two different school communities merged, which required them to align their pedagogical concepts. The other half of the sample schools mentioned conceptual reasons for developing personalized learning environments. Among them is a school with a visionary management that strives to improve student outcomes and a school with a motivated action group of management members and teachers who search for innovations in instruction and try to find solutions to challenges of teaching in very heterogeneous groups of learners.

The case study analysis resulted in three basic types of schools. They differ in terms of the existing structures of interaction, communication, and cooperation as well as regarding the contents they convey via these channels.

Type 1: The characteristics of such schools include – but are not limited to – small student numbers, private ownership, or primary-level education. Personalized learning concepts have been introduced for educational rather than for structural reasons. Communication takes place in casual, informal settings, or as one teacher puts it, there is "a dialog in the schoolyard." Teachers and/or school principals and parents mostly talk about the students' performance (grades, reports), homework, development and progress, behavior as well as about teaching and learning concepts. Usually, the parents give immediate individual and often emotional feedback on pedagogical issues. The implementation of personalized learning concepts can be put down to internal (i.e. pedagogical) reasons, and there are close interactions between school management, teachers, and parents, which often hinge on the individuals rather than on strategic structures.

Type 2: The second group includes five big schools that put only little effort into the strategic development of school-family partnerships. The existing structures largely tend to serve the purpose of conflict management and deal with a variety of content. As a consequence, there are merely rudimentary, non-binding interaction structures, and the relationship between school and parents is typically customer-like. If there are interactions, they are institutional in nature and usually take the form of large-scale parent events whose attendance is compulsory. On such occasions, the schools provide information on pedagogical or administrative issues. Apart from these formal events, the schools also organize sociable events, in which the families only rarely participate, however. Interactions mainly depend on the individual teachers who have to find their own ways of communicating and cooperating with the parents of their students. Often, there is an intense bilateral dialog although communication in general is mainly reactive in character. The points at issue are usually student performance, pedagogical concepts, instruction, and school transitions. Thus, a large part of the interaction consists in dealing with problems and settling conflicts between teachers and parents.

Type 3: This group includes – but is not limited to – schools with binding communication and cooperation structures that mainly relate to pedagogical issues, irrespective of school level, size, or reasons for implementing personalized learning concepts. Interactions take the form of systematically organized two-way communication and are characterized by clearly defined, strategically devised structures that apply to different institutional and individual levels (e.g., parent-teacher action/feedback groups or parent representation in decision-making processes). In the main, interactions focus on learning progress, competence development, agreements on objectives, school transition, and the pedagogical concept.

Two Examples

In the following, we describe two schools in more detail: the first example represents Type 3 (strategic communication and cooperation) while the second example relates to Type 2, whose interactions with parents are considered to be more reactive than those of Type 3 and tend to serve the purpose of conflict settlement.

Example of Type 3. In this middle-sized rural school, students spend part of their classes in open study spaces. Learning groups are mixed with respect to age, grade, and level of performance. Teachers work in teams of two. The shift towards personalized learning had been initiated about five years before the interviews conducted and was necessary for preventing the closure of the school because of a drop in student

numbers. In the interview, the teachers reported that in the beginning the parents had been very critical of the new concept. This negative reaction was compounded by the fact that experienced teachers had left the school because they did not support the new pedagogical direction (Teacher, group interview t_1).

At the time of the first group interview, the school had organized an information event for all parents of the next group of first-grade students a year before they entered school. On this occasion, the teachers introduced themselves and the core elements of the pedagogical concept, that is to say the composition of the learning groups, the curriculum, the student learning diary for monitoring learning processes, etc. The parents could ask questions and got clarifying answers. After the new students had entered school, the parents received further information about the teaching and learning practices in a small-group setting, in which the discussions revolved around the question of how parents can support their children's learning process in helpful ways.

Besides such information events, the school organizes further events throughout the year with the intention of presenting learning projects or the topics the children were supposed to deal with to the parents. Moreover, the students keep their own record of grades, and the parents have access to the teachers' notes on their children's learning progress and homework checking via a web-based information tool. The teachers said that they also call the parents to talk about the development of skills in different subject areas or about the transition to the next class level or to a vocational school (Teacher, group interview t_1). Furthermore, the school organizes parent-teacher conferences that are led by the student concerned. In such conferences, the students are to reflect on their progress. Thereafter, the individual student, the parents, and the teacher jointly set the goals for the next learning period. At the time of the first interview, the school had increased the number of conferences from one to two a year. A year later, the teachers reported that the parents had welcomed this decision and that it enabled everyone to understand and follow the learning process (Teacher, group interview t_2). The interviewees also reflected on practices that had not proved to be effective. For instance, a monthly "open house" for all families had been introduced, with little success, however: "Nobody ever shows up!" (Teacher, group interview t_3). In sum, the teachers believed that it had been the

close contact between school and families in general as well as the personal communication that had allowed the parents to understand the new pedagogical concept of the school and finally to accept or even support it (Teacher, group interview t_3).

Example of Type 2. This school is comparable to the previous one in terms of size and the administrative reasons for reforming the instructional practices and implementing personalized learning concepts. The reform had been implemented about two years before the interviews were conducted. According to the interviewed teachers and the school principal, many parents had initially been very critical of the school, because it was different from what it had been 25 years ago (Teacher, group interview t_1). So today, the website of the school provides a number of documents explaining the pedagogical concept. The interviewed teachers said that the school makes an effort to "get the parents aboard" and asks for their opinion on a range of issues in extensive surveys. It is not clear to all teachers, however, what "aboard" means or how the surveys can actually promote this objective (Teacher, group interview t_1). Moreover, they mentioned the following concern: "Getting the parents on board can also be counterproductive because they are likely to interfere all the time" (Teacher, group interview t_1). By the time of the first interview, the school had announced five official "open-house weeks" per school year. According to the publicly available official evaluation document, the parents did not use this opportunity, however, because the children did not like their visits to the school. In consequence, the number of visits was reduced in the following years. One teacher reported that he had once organized a "morning of desserts" but that only a few families had attended the event (Teacher, group interview t_1). The teachers also offer other parent activities such as dinners or exhibitions, which they consider to be strenuous and stressful, however (Teacher, group interview t_1). Besides, some proactive parents have initiated groups that discuss issues of childcare and education, but the teachers do not participate in this discourse because they are not invited and do not wish to do so either. Each teacher is responsible for finding his or her own way of communicating with the parents. Some teachers occasionally send e-mail newsletters (Teacher, group interview t_3).

Discussion and Conclusions

We have presented results of an analysis of interviews and strategic documents concerning the interaction between schools and families in Swiss schools that have implemented personalized learning concepts. The key findings show that on the pathway to personalized learning systematic school-specific communication and cooperation in educational respects seem to be essential features of successful school-family partnerships, especially in large schools. The results point to the benefits of a strategic use of communication and cooperation structures that are appropriate to the content to be conveyed as opposed to generic standard processes of parent involvement that do not take the actual context into account. It can be particularly helpful, for instance, to center the two-way channels of communication on student progress, to focus parent activities on education-related topics, and to give the parents a voice in decision-making processes. By contrast, schools that reported an adversarial, conflict-ridden relationship with the parents tend to have no or little institutional strategies or regulations for school-family interactions. Symptomatic of this type are for example, poor websites, non-representative parent boards, little effort to provide clarifying information on pedagogical concepts at parent events. Furthermore, parent gatherings tend to be merely sociable in character (e.g., a bowling evening with little time and space to talk to each other), and the teachers reported that they had to explain the school's pedagogical concepts in their own daily interactions with the parents, often facing the challenge of having to defend the philosophy of the school in general: "Formerly, we, that is the teachers, were usually criticized, but now the parents say 'It's not you, it's the system that doesn't work!'" (Teacher, group interview t_3). In summary, our findings indicate that it is beneficial to the overall school-parent interaction if structures such as parent events focus on pedagogical or conceptual topics (rather than on sociable aspects) are in place and if teacher-parent meetings mainly address student development and learning activities (rather than the philosophy of the school in general).

The schools in our sample that had implemented strategic tools for informing new families and had made information concerning their pedagogical concepts available to parents via various channels reported fewer misunderstandings between school and families on educational issues than schools without such structures. Furthermore, the teachers from these schools tend to talk about learning goals and student progress in a straightforward and concrete way rather than trying to convince the parents of the pedagogical concepts in general. In schools where school concepts and pedagogical/psychological questions are often on the agenda of larger parent gatherings such as events at the beginning or at the end of the school year, the teachers can focus on individual learning progress in their direct communication. Clarifying and discussing basic conceptual issues at the institutional level thus eases the pressure on the individual teachers. Some schools produced video clips about the innovations in their instruction, for example. Several of them maintain a plain but informative website, and some school principals publish monthly or quarterly newsletters. The teachers from these schools reported that they had a harmonious relationship with the parents and that they thought that the parents' support fostered the children's learning progress.

Making reference to the theoretical background outlined at the beginning of this paper, we can conclude that our findings contribute to the knowledge pertaining to the dynamic understanding of school-family relationships through interactions, as described in Epstein's model (2011). Schools that strategically deal with the overlap between the spheres that influence the child and make an effort to intensify the interactions between families and schools reported more fruitful relationships within the school community than schools without such structures, irrespective of their size or reasons for shifting towards personalized learning. Because it is a common feature of all the schools in the sample that they have changed their "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454), each of them is "forced" to ensure that the parents of their students understand and support their innovative educational concepts. One teacher phrased the challenge as follows: "In the school experience of the parents, the teacher was just lecturing at the front" (Teacher, group interview t_3). As soon as the parents understand how certain forms of cooperative learning work or why it is important that the students can arrange their own schedule, the focus of the communication can be specifically directed to the individual students' progress and to goal setting.

As the research reviewed in the theory section above indicates, in order to promote student achievement schools are in need of advice and

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support that is firmly grounded in empirical evidence on how to improve the interactions with the families of their students. Furthermore, teachers need to be able to concentrate on their core activities, that is fostering the learning process of their students, and should not be required to devise their own strategies for communicating with the parents (Egger et al., 2014). An indispensable condition for this are the parents' trust in the school and the capability of the teachers as well as elaborated interaction structures provided by the school management.

Although this paper has presented research on a very innovative group of schools, the results indicate that explicit, strategic school policies on the involvement of families can be regarded as a key feature of successful communication in general, irrespective of the nature of the instructional concepts in use. From this general point of view, our study also supports findings that showed good relationships between school and families to be a significant characteristic of effective schools (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, & Roberts, 2015). Thus, as our results shed light on the interplay between communication and cooperation structures and the contents to be conveyed; they contribute to the existing empirical knowledge of how to devise practicable strategic approaches to developing fruitful school-family interactions.

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