

## **FAMILY - SCHOOL COOPERATION - A TOPIC FOR SWISS TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study is the Swiss contribution to the European collaboration project on improving (pre-service) teachers' preparation for Family-School partnerships. It is aimed at investigating, how Swiss Schools of Teacher Education prepare kindergarten-, primary- and secondary I- school teacher candidates for family – school cooperation<sup>1</sup>. To meet this objective, the study conducted questionnaire surveys, key-informant interviews and document analysis. Nine Schools of Teacher Education in the German speaking part of Switzerland were surveyed, while one institution was looked upon in depth: In addition, three representatives of the institution were interviewed.*

*The preliminary findings show that all Schools of Teacher Education, irrespectively of the fact, if they prepare for kindergarten-, primary- or secondary I - school level, give importance to family-school cooperation as an issue for preparing teacher candidates. A broad variety of issues is covered in the curricula of the schools: communication with parents, conflict management and relating to families with special need children are the most prominent ones. A majority of Schools of Teacher Education offer a special course on this subject. Preparing for family – school cooperation is an important issue also during in-field-training. The in-depth-study shows that extent, significance and content of the topic in the courses largely depend on the teacher educator, who is giving the course.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the survey, we used the term „Zusammenarbeit“ („cooperation“). Respondents were alerted that the term includes all forms of cooperation, collaboration, and partnership between kindergarten/school and the legal representatives of the students as well as the cooperation with representatives and institutions of the community.

*Despite these efforts by the Schools of Teacher Education, no respondent views the teacher candidates really good prepared for Family-school cooperation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A couple of international studies suggest that teacher education institutes pay insufficient or even no attention to the preparation of their students for family-school cooperation (Epstein and Sanders 2006; Denessen et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2013; de Bruine et al. 2014). Evans (2013) acknowledges the increased attention to family-school cooperation issues in teacher education. He points out that despite these improvements novice teachers still do not feel well prepared collaborating with families. He also states that the subject of family-school cooperation is not addressed in a useful way by the Schools of Teacher Education.

One of the reasons might be that there are many different concepts of family-school cooperation competing with each other. There is no uniform understanding of family-school cooperation, neither in the academic community nor in the schools. Stange (2013) lists more than 15 different German and 10 English terms for family-school cooperation, each with a specific concept behind it. Sacher (2014) points out that even if the same term is used the specific activities or practices might differ. He also stresses that the success criteria for family-school cooperation are inconsistent. Given the ambiguity and complexity of the concept of family-school cooperation, it is not surprising that candidates receive mixed messages (de Bruin et al. 2014).

It seems undisputed that practical training in schools is one of the promising opportunities for teacher candidates to develop the needed skills for family-school cooperation (f.e. Epstein and Sanders 2006; Flanigan 2007; Uludag 2008; Bartels and Eskow 2010). However, opportunities for teacher candidates to interact directly with parents are very rare (Evans 2013). But even if they do have such opportunities, they don't necessarily have clear role models: Evans (2013) states that students receive mixed messages during their practical training in schools due to the great variety of definitions and attitudes towards parents. Egger, Lehmann and Straumann (2015) conclude that there is a lack of professionalisation of the teachers' actions in the field of family-school cooperation.

Kroeger and Lash (2011) draw the attention to another important factor: It is not only the content of the curriculum and lectures that influence attitude and practice

of novice teachers, but also the language that educators in the Schools of Teacher Education and teachers in the schools use contributes to the students' assumptions and attitudes towards parents.

In Switzerland, there is little research on the preparation of future teachers to work with the families of their students. A regional longitudinal study in the canton of Zurich among 251 novice teachers shows that their „*notion of being judged by parents and not being able to meet their expectations*“ ranks as the second highest pressure that these new teachers felt (Zingg and Grob 2002). Another study among teacher candidates in the canton of Thurgau in 2011 reveals that the novice teachers don't feel really confident about their action knowledge and practical knowledge on working with parents or on their ability to communicate with them (PH Thurgau 2011).

## **FAMILY – SCHOOL COOPERATION IN SWITZERLAND**

In the last decade, the roles of teachers and schools in Switzerland are significantly changing, and so are expectations about them: Educators are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs and those with little or no knowledge of the local language, work in multiprofessional teams, engage in school development and establish regular contacts with parents. National and cantonal policies in Switzerland increasingly promote family-school cooperation. However, there are only few legal specifications on how teachers have to cooperate with parents: Basically, teachers have to inform parents about the academic performance of the students and about special incidents like mobbing, drugs and general unwanted behavior in one collective and one individual meeting per year.

There is little research on family-school cooperation in Switzerland. Research studies by Egger et al. (2015) and Schüpbach, Slokar and Nieuwenboom (2013) suggest that there is little cooperation between school and home beyond the legal minimum. The interaction of teachers with parents can be described as full of tensions and ambivalence. Despite increasing regulation and formalization, teachers still have a high degree of freedom when it comes to shaping their concrete interactions with the parents. The way, teachers shape their cooperation with the parents in the sense of a stipulated pedagogic and educational cooperation, depends above all on the habitualised background convictions of the teachers towards parents (Egger et al. 2015).

## **TEACHER EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND**

At the beginning of 21st century „Pädagogische Hochschulen“ (Schools of Teacher Education), which are Universities of Applied Sciences, were established in Switzerland. By now, there are 15 Schools of Teacher Education in all Switzerland that provide end-to-end teacher education for kindergarten<sup>2</sup>, primary and secondary I level teacher education. In some cantons, secondary I teacher education is organized on university level, not by the Schools of Teacher Education.

12 of these Schools of Teacher Education are located in the German speaking, two in the French speaking, and one in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland.

There is no national curriculum for Schools of Teacher Education, and there are only few national guidelines on the curricula. Regulations are just on a formal level. The Association of all Ministers of Education of all Swiss Cantons, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Secretaries of Education (EDK), reviews and approves the curricula of the Schools of Teacher Education. Curricula are modular and allow a high degree of individualization and flexibility for students.

On kindergarten and primary school level, the curricula are designed as three-years-Bachelor studies. A master diploma is required for teachers on the secondary school level. Students study up to four school subjects; some programs presuppose a relevant bachelor diploma at a classic university.

Four Schools of Teacher Education provide an integral program for the whole primary level teacher education (kindergarten and primary school up to grade 6). Four Schools of Teacher Education offer a separate program for kindergarten, six offer a program for learning cycle 1 (kindergarten plus primary school up to grade 2 or 3), ten offer a separate program for primary school teachers (grade 1 – 6) and seven offer a program for secondary I teacher education.

## **THE STUDY**

The present study is the first one in Switzerland on a national level, respectively across all German speaking cantons of Switzerland on the subject. It was conducted in 2016 in order to get a better understanding, how Swiss teacher candidates are prepared for working with parents and how teacher education programs in Switzerland address this topic. In contrary to the former studies, we

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<sup>2</sup> Two years of kindergarten (or the first two years of a first learning cycle) is included in compulsory education in the majority of the Swiss cantons.

shifted the perspective from the students' perspective to the perception of teacher education institutes.

The main research question of this study is: How are teacher candidates prepared for their work with parents?

## **Methodology**

Preparation for collaboration with parents in Schools of Teacher Education was investigated in this study. To address the research question, we utilized a written questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent to all 12 Schools of Teacher Education in the German speaking part of Switzerland, respectively to the people in charge of the programs. Moreover, we did a document analysis and conducted in-depth interviews with lecturers giving courses on or linked to family-school cooperation in one of the Schools of Teacher Education.

With the help of these instruments, we explored the coverage of family-school cooperation in the preservice training of school teachers, the institutional perception of the importance of the issue as well as the preparedness of the students in this area.

### *Research tools*

With the help of a questionnaire we collected data from the Swiss teacher education institutes on how they prepare pre-service teachers for family-school cooperation. The survey questionnaire is based on a US survey by Epstein in 1997 published in 2006 (Epstein, J. & Sanders, M. 2006) and a Dutch adaption of this questionnaire by Willemse et al. (2015).

The survey questionnaire consisted of a mix of closed- and open-ended questions to increase the depth of answers to the research questions.

Data was collected on demographic characteristics of the Schools of Teacher Education, on program structure and present course offerings, on the perception of leaders of the programs on teacher candidates' preparedness to work with parents and on prospects of change in present programs.

### *Sample*

Surveys were sent to all 12 Schools of Teacher Education in the German speaking part of Switzerland. In 2015, the total number of students (kindergarten up to secondary I level) enrolled in these 12 Schools of Teacher Education was about

13.500 students. The size of the 12 Schools of Teacher Education varies largely: The smallest one has about 130 students, the biggest about 3500.

The addressees were the deans respectively heads of the departments for pre-/primary /secondary I school education programs. Most surveys were passed on to employees of the universities like professors, who are more familiar with the subject.

The mailing yielded returns from nine institutions, seven Schools of Teacher Education answered for all their programs, whereas two Schools of Teacher Education responded only for part of their programs.

<b>9 Schools of Teacher Education (75%) with 18 programs (58 %)</b>				
4 teacher education programs	3 teacher education programs	2 teacher education programs	7 teacher education programs	2 teacher education programs
only for kindergarten	kindergarten plus primary school grade 1,2 (& 3)	kindergarten plus grade 1 – 6	only for primary school	only for secondary I
(100%)	(50%)	(50 %)	(70 %)	(29 %)

Figure 1: Overview on returns by program

In our sample, we find all kindergarten teacher education programs that exist in the German speaking part of Switzerland, most of the primary school programs, however only two secondary I teacher education programs. Considering the public and academic discourse on family – school relationship, we interpret this difference in the way that the representatives of teacher education programs for kindergarten and primary school level are highly aware of and attuned to the topic of family-school relationship.

87.5% of all kindergarten to secondary I level teacher students in the German speaking part of Switzerland are covered by this survey.

### *Results*

In this article, we present some preliminary results on certain aspects of the study.

First of all, all respondents consider family-school cooperation to be an important or at least rather important topic of teachers' preservice training.

In all participating institutions and programs, the topic of family-school cooperation is either covered in a full course on this issue, or it is referred to family-school cooperation in other courses.

Unlike the findings of Epstein and Sanders (2006) and Willemse et al. (2015), we couldn't see a significant difference in the coverage of family-school cooperation as a subject for teacher education between the programs of the kindergarten, primary school and secondary I school level teacher education. One of the reasons might be that the Schools for Teacher Education that offer programs on the three different levels usually offer the same or at least similar courses in their programs - independently of the level.

The significance of the topic of family-school cooperation in the view of a Schools of Teacher Education might be measured from the fact, if there is a full course on the topic offered to the teacher students. Five programs (27,7%) offer a full required course on family-school cooperation, three offer a voluntary course, and ten programs do not have a specific course on family-school cooperation. However, all 18 programs offer at least two education courses that include the topic or that contain subjects linked to family-school cooperation in 2 - 7 sessions. We find an average of 4,6 courses per program, where family-school cooperation is linked to the topic. Almost all of these courses are compulsory. The Schools of Teacher Education with a big number of students offer more courses linked to family-school cooperation than the smaller ones.

Moreover, in all programs family-school cooperation is part of the practical training in school and its accompanying formats like mentoring and reflecting seminars. The practical training should include direct and indirect interactions with parents. If possible, they should be comprehensive and prolonged.

Thus, you can conclude that all students of the participating Schools of Teacher Education get into contact with the topic of family-school cooperation during their studies.

In the questionnaire, 18 topics concerning family-school cooperation were listed. Most of the respondents consider these topics important, and each program usually covers at least 12 out of the 18 topics. Three programs even cover all topics. Six issues were covered by all programs: *“Parental involvement in the transition process of the student”*, *“organizing and conducting a parent-teacher meeting”*, *“involving students in a parent-teacher meeting”*, *“organizing parents' evenings”*, *“written communication with parents”*, and *“heterogeneity of parents”* (migrants,

social class, less inclined to education). The topics of “*family-school cooperation and special need students*”, “*theory of partnership between school, home and community*”; and “*parents’ role in homework*” were covered by 16 programs (88,9 %). Only 50 % of the programs cover the topics of “*quality and evaluation*”, “*involvement of partners from the community*” and “*involving parents in teaching activities*”. The lowest coverage is found with the subject of “*multi-professional cooperation in working with parents*”. It is covered only in seven programs (38,9 %).

You can conclude, that rather complex topics (such as how to evaluate effects of family and community involvement or how to reach out to the community) are less often offered to teacher candidates.

We interpret these findings as a hint that part of the Schools of Teacher Education put the focus more on those topics that are relevant for class teachers in their daily practice with parents. Above all, teachers are viewed upon as «*communicators*» with families, but less as «*connectors*» or «*brokers*», who bring together families and communal agents, or as «*coaches*», who empower families/parents (cf. Lueder 1993; Lehmann 2012).

All programs offer at least two courses connected to the subject. The Schools for Teacher Education named 11 different courses that make this connection. Of course, the exact wording of these courses is different with every School of Teacher Education. However, we could identify 11 different main focuses.

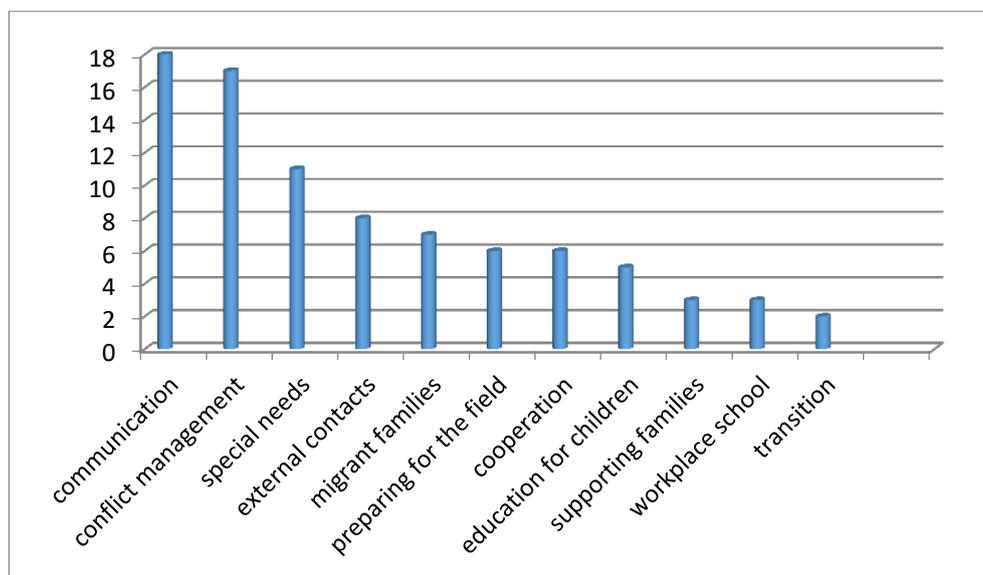


Figure 2: Courses, connecting subject with family-school cooperation

In all the programs, there are courses on “communication” and all these courses relate to family-school cooperation, usually with sessions on how to communicate with parents. The subject of “conflict management” is linked to family-school cooperation in 17 programs. In 61 % of the programs family-school cooperation is covered in several sessions of the courses on “educating special needs children”,. 44,4 % of the courses on “schools as organizations with its external contacts” also connect this subject to family-school cooperation. 38,9 % of the programs offer special courses on “migration/migrant families” with links to family-school cooperation in two or more sessions.

We also wanted to know, how important the Schools of Teacher Education view school teachers ability to work with families. There is no doubt on the importance of knowledge and skills on family-school cooperation for teachers among the respondents: 88,9 % of them strongly agreed that «it is important for all teachers to be able to conduct practices of working with parents and of school, family and community». The rest of them consider this skill rather important.

However, only 16,7 % of the respondents stated that it is very important for students to demonstrate this skill during their practical training in school, whereas 38,9% viewed it as somewhat important. (44,4 % don't have an opinion on this issue.)

The representatives of the Schools of Teacher Education were also asked, what they believe is the state of preparedness of teacher candidates.

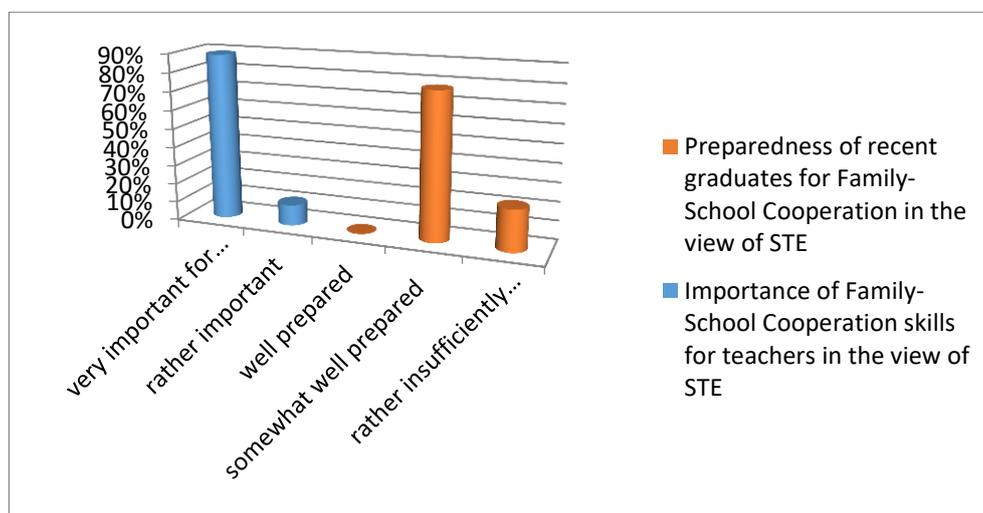


Figure 3: Importance vs. preparation of graduates to establish family-school cooperation in the view of Schools of Teacher Education

None of the respondents believes that recent graduates are well prepared to work with parents and establish a good Family-school cooperation. At least 77,8 % believe that the students are somewhat good prepared, whereas 22,2 % believe that they are rather insufficiently prepared. Interestingly, the respondents of kindergarten and primary school teacher education institutes with mandatory or elective full courses on family-school cooperation are more skeptical about the preparedness of their students than the representatives of institutes without full courses on family-school cooperation.

Addressees were also asked, if the subject of family-school cooperation should be more prominent in their future curricula, either as a full course on the topic, or integrated in courses with other topics, or in any other form.

Only 16,7 % of the respondents agreed, „*that Family-school cooperation should play a more important role in their curriculum*“. Only two Schools of Teacher Education state that they have plans to improve the preparation for preparing students for family-school cooperation in the next couple of years and that might be a realistic chance to change the curriculum in the next couple of years.

This is surprising, since none of the respondents views recent graduates well prepared for family-school cooperation.

Some respondents argue that *«a three years' teacher training is only an introduction. If future teachers need more skills, they have to participate in specific further education program on this topic»*. In the same line, some respondents suggest that the topic should be *«more strongly emphasized in optional courses for interested teachers as part by their ongoing training and should be offered by the Schools for Teacher Education»*.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Switzerland, family – school cooperation is a topic in all programs of teacher education. There is no significant difference between the levels of teaching, students are prepared for.

Five out of 18 programs offer a full required course on family-school cooperation, three offer a voluntary course. All Schools of Teacher Education offer at least two compulsory courses linked to family-school cooperation. “Communicating with parents” is a topic that is covered in all programs.

Content and extent of the linkage largely depend on the individual educator of the Schools of Teacher Education.

All programs offer practical training in school. Contacts with parents are supposed to be part of the training. However: Quality and quantity of the contacts depend on the individual school teacher.

In the view of the respondents, teacher novices do not feel well prepared for family-school cooperation, nevertheless there is great reluctance with to give family-school cooperation more importance in future curricula or to plan other changes in the curricula concerning preparing for family-school cooperation.

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