

## Home-school relationship in the context of reception of newly arrived emergent bilingual pupils: a comparative and exploratory study between Hamburg (Germany) and Franche-Comté (France)

**Ann-Birte Krüger**

*Université de Franche-Comté, France*  
[abkruger@univ-fcomte.fr](mailto:abkruger@univ-fcomte.fr)

**Sílvia Melo-Pfeifer**

*Univeristy of Hamburg, Germany*  
[silvia.melo-pfeifer@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:silvia.melo-pfeifer@uni-hamburg.de)

### Abstract

This Franco-German exploratory and comparative study is rooted in the tradition of interdisciplinary qualitative empirical research, at the crossroads of sociology, language sciences, and education sciences. It aims at analysing and questioning the representations of the different stakeholders concerning the reception of newly arrived emergent bilingual pupils and the home-school relationship. For the comparative study, we focus on Germany and France in two specific regions: Hamburg (Germany) and Franche-Comté (France), and in particular on pre-school/kindergarten and primary schools. We rely on semi-structured interviews with families and stakeholders in school in the German and French contexts. In this paper we seek to understand and compare the home-school relationships in the two chosen educational contexts and question the importance of the national contexts with their specific histories regarding welcoming policies and the promotion of the home-school relationship. The results help to determine whether or not and how cooperation between school and newly arrived families can facilitate families' transition to a new school culture.

Keywords: *home-school relationship, newly arrived migrant families, emergent bilingual pupils*

### 1. Introduction

In many parts of the world the school population is characterized by its *multiplurilingualism* (Bes & Ehrhart, 2019), i.e., the combination of a student population with different L1 and with different constellations of linguistic repertoires (plurilingualism), and a coexistence of multiple languages in the institutional space (multilingualism). Several publications emphasise the importance of welcoming and recognising linguistic and cultural diversity in an inclusive way in school (García, 2009; García et al., 2006; Krüger et al., 2016; Moro, 2012; Thomauske, 2017) as one part for leading to success in pupils' education. As Pickel (2021) points out, children's home environments and school are places of paramount importance for the construction of the self, a process in which the perception of the self, by oneself and by others, plays an important role. Therefore, teachers' positive attitudes towards pupils' home context, their languages and cultures play a particularly important role in identity construction (Komur-Thillooy & Paprocka-Piotrowska, 2016; Leclaire & Perregaux, 2016).

Like Mary and Young (2017: 108), we consider “a child whose language differs from the language of the school to be an emergent bilingual from the very first day s/he sets foot in the school.” Some teachers lack knowledge about language acquisition and bilingualism (such as subtractive views of bilingualism), combined with erroneous notions about languages and their speakers in the educational context (such as preventing the use of heritage languages at school) (Hélot, 2007). Such misconceptions may lead to a situation where pupils are perceived as having a deficit in the school language (Thamin, 2015), rather than being emergent bilingual pupils (García & Kleifgen, 2010). In this paper, we’ll investigate more deeply the situation of young emergent bilingual pupils in school by focussing on the home-school relationship, through a tentative comparison of the French and the German context. Analysing this situation with a comparative focus is all the more necessary because, as Paseka & Byrne (2020a) recognise, “while both commonalities and differences exist with regard to parental involvement across European educational systems, there is a dearth of comparative and critical examination of the issue” (p. 1; see also Paseka & Byrne, 2020b).

For several years, both French and German school curricula have been increasingly emphasizing the importance of the relationship between schools and families, as well as the concept of co-education. While official documents don’t explicitly address the context of migration, numerous studies have pointed out that the lack of mutual understanding between educational institutions and parents, coupled with negative perceptions occasionally held by schools, especially regarding migrant families, can be detrimental to students’ academic success and development (Betz et al., 2017; Cummins, 2000; Moro, 2012). These studies primarily focus on analysing the viewpoints of school staff, often without incorporating the perspectives of the families.

Building on our experience with inclusive models and pupil integration in educational settings, in this study we aim to examine the intricate relationship between families and schools, in two different contexts. This exploratory study, grounded in the tradition of interdisciplinary qualitative empirical research and situated at the intersection of sociology, language sciences, and education sciences, intends to investigate and challenge the perceptions held by various stakeholders concerning the reception of recently arrived emergent bilingual students and the dynamics of the homeschool relationship in two specific regions. The study particularly focuses on pre-school/kindergarten and primary schools. The aim of this article is to understand whether and how collaboration between the school and newly arrived families can facilitate the families’ transition to a new school culture.

After presenting the home-school relationship as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool, we briefly outline this subject in official education documents in France and Germany. Further, we look into the organisation of the school systems in both countries, with a focus on structures to integrate newly arrived families. In the second part, we explore and compare the empirical data obtained through interviews and observations in both national contexts about the role assigned to home-school cooperation.

## **2. The Home-School Relationship: Theoretical Framework**

The transition from home to school involves different ruptures, this being a potentially difficult period in terms of ecological transitions in the life of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and concomitant emotional and relational ecosystems in a child’s life. This transition from child to pupil may be even more complicated for young children (pre-school) and/or for children in one of the two situations: 1) having a cultural and linguistic background at home which varies from the school context (Krüger et al., 2016; Massumi et al., 2018); or 2) having lived schooling and biographical disruptions (Fingerle, 2018; Schröder & Seuka, 2018). Moreover, upon entry into pre-school, the

children's socialization soon places them in relationships which can be lived harmoniously by the children but led parents to the perception "that they are being dispossessed of their child" (Krüger & Thamin, 2021). Professionals must keep in mind the need to support parents in their role as parents, and help them to become legitimate interlocutors (Périer, 2021; Goï, 2008; Mestre, 2015). The family language can constitute a bridge or cleavage between school and home, depending on the communication between families and schools and the relationship between classroom language policy and family language policy (Melo-Pfeifer et al., 2024). School needs to develop a positive view of migrant families and the languages spoken at home in order to provide caring and stress-free support in relation to the language of the school and to enable the child to understand the world of school with its standards, codes and rules (Moro, 2012). The collaboration between parents and teachers helps families feel included and increases their confidence in parenting (Krüger & Thamin, 2021, Lasne et al., 2021). This partnership allows teachers to change their perception of parents and of pupils (Simonin, 2018), and may increase pupil's participation in the classroom (Flecha, 2015). Akkari and Changkakoti (2009) propose a selection of research conducted in various contexts (North America and French-speaking contexts in Europe) handling the relationship between parents and teachers with a special interest for social diversity. They note that migrant families of diverse and multiple cultures often remain invisible in the school culture, which is governed by ethnocentric and rigid normative functions. They emphasize the risk of a lack of mutual understanding between teaching staff and parents who have different social and cultural background than the school context. Leclaire and Perregaux (2016) advocate for giving all parents in school a genuine role as co-educators, to address the contradictions experienced between school and home. The intention is that parents and children don't abandon their vision of the world, but put the contradictions into words, and turn them into a precious asset.

This brief review highlights a discrepancy between, on one hand, the theory emphasizing the importance of collaboration between home and school, and providing concrete methods for establishing this partnership; and on the other hand, various studies across different national school contexts, which highlight the lack of genuine collaboration between home and school, particularly with parents from migrant backgrounds. However, this discrepancy should not be generalised, as it would not do justice to the engagement of many teachers. Some good examples can be found on the French website *Bilem*<sup>1</sup>. These concern in particular, but by no means exclusively, language awareness projects that involve families and their languages and cultures. The study by Mary and Young (2021) can also be mentioned, which had its starting point in the teaching practice of a pre-school teacher and her commitment to opening up schools to families.

The present study aims to enrich this research field by exploring the discourse of families and school staff regarding the home-school relationship in the French-German context. Our objective is to contribute to the knowledge of how to better facilitate children's and families' transition to a new school culture by identifying practices that can promote a smoother transition.

### **3. The context of the study**

When doing multisite research and reporting on the process and results, it is important to give an account of the relevant characteristics of the contexts being covered (Jenkins et al., 2018). For this reason, in this section, we provide information on the organisation of the school systems in both contexts, at the national and regional levels, and sociodemographic data to clarify the relevance and actuality of the topic in question.

#### **3.1 Franche-Comté (France)**

The French part of this study is part of a larger research project about the education of emergent bilingual pupils in pre-school and primary school in the Franche-Comté region (situated in the east

of France bordering Alsace, Burgundy, and Switzerland) between 2012 and 2019. At the time, most of the newly arrived migrants in Franche-Comté were from North Africa, Turkey, and the Balkans. The number of immigrants in this part of France is below the national average (6,8% of the population, compared with the national average of 10,3% (INSEE, 2019, 2023)). Apart from some economic hotspots (Besançon, Montbéliard/Belfort) it is a rural area with a low socio-economic status. Pre-primary education (*école maternelle*), which is public, free and has been compulsory since 2019, begins at the age of three and lasts for three years. Children then start primary school at the age of six, attending for five years. The education for teachers working in both types of schools is the same: a Master's degree course for primary school teaching and a one-year traineeship.

In primary and secondary schools in France, newly arrived children who do not speak French can claim additional language support in the school-language as a second language (when available) (Frisa 2014; Goi 2015). This does not apply in the case of children in pre-school where simple immersion in the French language throughout the participation in the normal school week (24 hours per week) is considered to be enough to master the school language as emphasised in a previous study (Krüger & Thamin, 2021). This is a rather surprising decision on language policy, especially as school attendance is compulsory even in pre-school.

School education in France is governed by a national curriculum setting out the objectives and orientations, the subjects and skills to be taught in the three cycles for pupils aged from three to eleven.

Even though historically, the role of parents in the French education system was relatively small, progress is being made in the institutional discourse on school-family relationships, beginning with the text addressing this subject in 2006 (MEN), the circular of 2008 entitled “A school open to parents” (MEN 2008), and the recent reforms since around 2013 (MEN 2013). The education system has understood that the bond between school and family is crucial for the success of all students in school. In the new curriculum for pre-school dating from 2015, the home-school relationship has a great importance as it is one of the first points considered on the first page of the document (MEN 2015, p. 2). The rising public interest in this issue is also reflected in the report about “Home-school relationships. Current situation and progressive changes”<sup>2</sup> from 2021 for the Minister of Education. In this report we can read that the home-school relationship created in pre-school should be an example for French schools in general (Inspection Générale de l'Éducation, du Sport et de la Recherche 2021, p. 38-39). Incidentally, this is also one of the reasons why the study on the French side is located in the pre-school sector.

### 3.1 Hamburg (Germany)

In Germany, formal education is mandatory from 6 to 15, kindergartens as a form of pre-school being attended on a voluntary basis (see Paseka & Killus, 2020c, for an overview of the school system). Education and upbringing are considered a joint task for parents and school. This is clearly stated in the Resolution of the Ministries of Education of the different federal states (KMK 04.12.2003, from the 23.06.2022). The word used to set the setting for this joint task is better described in terms of “working together” (“Zusammenarbeit” in the German document; Killus & Paseka, 2020, use the term “cooperation”). Among other themes covered by the above-mentioned documents are parental rights and parental obligations, solving educational conflicts together, and involving parents in the further development of school and teaching quality. The discourse on parental involvement in Germany is highly normative (Killus & Paseka, 2020; Paseka & Killus, 2020c), characterized by the intertwining of two strands of discussion, both related to social inequality and inequity in education: “the first focuses on those parents who appear unable to

effectively support their children in school, while the second looks at how to motivate ‘hard-to-reach parents’ to become more involved in school affairs” (Paseka & Killus, 2020a, p. 21). While not expressly declared, parents and families with a migrant background are more targeted by such thematic discussions than others.

In this national context, especially in connection with the PISA studies (Paseka & Killus, 2020c), the relationship between school and families takes on a central role, which is crucial for understanding the performance of students from early years onwards (Gomolla, 2009; Klopsch et al., 2018; Reinhofer, 2019). The basis for the cooperation between family and pre-school structures is laid down in the “Kinder und Jugendhilfegesetz” (SGB VIII, <https://www.sozialgesetzbuch-sgb.de/sgbviii/1.html>). In addition, the “Tagesbetreuungsausbaugesetz” (Daycare Expansion Act) of 2004 stipulates that daycare centres must take ethnic and linguistic, social and cultural needs as well as religious beliefs into account in the child’s education. According to the survey by Lengyel & Salem (2016, p. 4), most federal states have advocated for collaborative structures between migrant families and daycare centres in specific legislation, especially to address communication and organisational problems. This collaborative work is aimed at setting common educational goals (also Gomolla, 2009, for other educational institutions).

In Germany, the considerable increase in the number of refugees in 2015 and 2016 triggered various political reactions that also affected the school system: e.g. different forms of school inclusion were developed (Markmann & Osburg, 2016; see also Decker-Ernst for an historical perspective), these were partly evaluated and, at the same time, more training positions for DaZ (German as a second language) were created (Decker-Ernst, 2017, particularly on the federal state Baden-Württemberg). The study was conducted in Hamburg, a major city and federal state with about 1,89 Million inhabitants over 755 km<sup>2</sup>. According to Statista, at the end of 2021, around 710,600 residents in Hamburg had a migration background. In 2010, about 515,000 people with a migration background were counted. In terms of refugees and asylee seekers, Hamburg has 240 shelters in the city, housing around 44,000 refugees. According to Sprandel, “in 2015, like many European cities, Hamburg faced a peak in refugee arrivals. Since January 2015, 71,000 refugees have arrived in Hamburg and 39,000 are still living in the city. Most refugees came from war-torn Syria, and from the troubled states of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Eritrea. Since last year, Hamburg has also seen a rise in Turks fleeing their country and applying for political asylum in Germany” (2018, p. 20).

#### 4. Methodology

This comparative study follows a multisite and multimethod approach. According to Jenkins et al. (2018, p. 1969), “multisite designs emerged in response to critiques that the specific and contextualized nature of single-site findings may limit the utility of case study research for informing actions relevant and applicable to other settings”. By collecting data in different countries (meaning also school systems, as described previously), we intended to “enhance transferability and trustworthiness of findings to other contexts by comparing data across sites, while preserving the site-specific understandings foundational to the methodology” (Jenkins et al., 2018, p. 1969). On the other hand, it followed research protocols and instruments that are not identical in both contexts, even if both follow a qualitative design. The empirical data used in this study was collected in semi-structured interviews in the German and French school context with newly arrived migrant families. For ethical reasons (to avoid othering the families and their origins) and to make sure the participants keep the anonymity, we only provide information on the (professional) status of the participants.

In Hamburg (Germany) one group interview with families and four interviews with educational staff (school director, two teachers, and an intercultural mediator) were conducted in 2021. The starting point for the data collection was the ProConcept project which intended to understand how families, school staff, and the students understood the relationship between families and the school

(Melo-Pfeifer et al, 2024). The study was conducted at a primary school where 100% of the students had a migrant and refugee background, located in an area with several refugee reception centres. For the focus group with the families, the researcher participated in a school event to which families were invited, and that took the form of a world soups “contest”, i.e. families with different backgrounds were invited to cook a famous soup from their home countries. This event was multilingual and the researcher and the family participants used mainly German for communicative purposes, despite this being a foreign language for all, including the researcher. Nevertheless, it was the only language common to all participants and the transcriptions carry out the traces of “researching multilingually” (Andrews et al., 2020), such as hesitations, just-in-time translations, and non-native use of the language. We opted for this format also as a way to conduct ethical interviews (Rolland, Dewaele & Costa, 2020), “voicing solidarity” (Andrews et al., 2020, p. 77) with parents’ issues with the German language<sup>3</sup> and undoing relationships based on nativespeakerism in the research. By doing this, we consider the parents to be legitimate speakers of the language of the host country. For the interviews with the teachers and the intercultural mediator, we attended classes at school and engaged afterwards in conversations with the participants via Zoom (in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic), according to teachers’ availability. A semi-structured interview was planned and conducted in German, including common questions for all participants and specific questions, according to the role of each interviewed person in the school.

The starting point for the data collection in the France-Comté (France) context was a larger research project with pre-school and primary school teachers working in this region. They reported a lack of teacher training focused on the needs of their specific multicultural and non-French-speaking populations. Their pivotal question was how to work with very young pupils who do not speak the language of the school. This project allowed us to work collaboratively with professionals. Essential for the comparative approach is that in both countries our study enabled us to analyse the experiences and methods of the professionals and to integrate the voices of parents in our project. The data collected in the French context give a multifaceted view on the different shareholders in school. Seven interviews were conducted with parents of pupils of different origins, from three countries around the Mediterranean in 2018, and we worked with student assistants as translators when necessary. Three interviews were conducted with educational staff: one headmaster (and at the same time she was a teacher) and two teachers in 2016, and the last eight interviews were conducted with pedagogical assistants in pre-school<sup>4</sup> in 2022.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data collected in both settings:

Setting	Data collected
France	3 interviews with two teachers and one headmaster in pre-school 7 interviews with parents 8 pedagogical assistants in pre-school
Germany	3 interviews with one teacher, one mediator, and one headmaster in primary school 1 focus group with families 3 classroom observations pictures of the linguistic landscape of the school

*Table 1. Data collected in both settings.*

For this study, which comparatively examines the home-school relationship, the analysis of the data was based on selecting significant episodes/key segments from interviews. This was done following a coding system that unveiled the most common thematic strands related to the main theme of the research, i.e., the collaboration between schools and families.

Analysing common thematic strands in both contexts, following content analysis (Burwitz-Melzner & Steininger, 2016; Dörnyei, 2007), is important for comparison and triangulation of results coming from different research protocols (Jenkins et al., 2018).

We highlight our comparative and cross-site analysis approach, but for methodological reasons it is important not to lose sight of various methodological weak points of this comparison. It is the matter of different school systems, pupils of different ages (pre-school and elementary school), various status and origins of the newly arrived families, and the fact that the guidelines for the interviews were not the same. However, our data aimed to explore the same research questions in Hamburg and Franche-Comté, and this is the principal focus of this study.

### 5. Findings: the reception of newly arrived emergent bilingual pupils in France and Germany

This section is organised around the comparison of three structuring (and interrelated) discussion themes that emerged in France and Germany: languages of immigrant and school communities and how they are managed at school and at home; building and maintaining the school-family relationship; and the dynamics of that relationship in the classroom.

#### 5.1 Voices about languages, voices about multilingualism at home and school

All participants referred to linguistic issues during interviews, showing that languages move the minds of our interviewees in both national contexts. The language education policy implemented in a classroom depends on macro (curricula), meso (school) and, above all, micro (teachers’) decisions. In both schools where we collected the data with teachers after observations *in loco*, the school was aware of the multilingualism of its pupils. When teachers were open to the cultural and linguistic diversity of their classes, the linguistic classroom landscape turned into a great witness of this diversity. In this case and in both contexts, the school has succeeded in creating a multilingual visual environment in which languages are an integral part of school life and a sign of lived multilingualism for families and school, as illustrated in Image 1:



Image 1. The linguistic diversity of the school population in the school foyer (German context).

However, it is important to note that the view of teachers and parents of the languages in contact and the practices of these languages are not always the same. The opinions can diverge from reflections of teachers about how to make parents speak the school language with their children to

comments of parents who regret that their children use the school language more and more frequently.

*Franche-Comté, Teacher 2: So yes, I think it's great to be bilingual. They are right to speak their mother tongue and we know in any case, the richer the mother tongue the easier it will be to acquire a new language. The problem is the children we don't talk to. This is another issue we are also confronted to. But my advice to them if they speak French it is to let them do it and then try to mark the difference between home and outside. At home for example you speak your mother tongue and, on the way to school, you can start speaking in French or when shopping at the supermarket next door. There are parents who play the game and there are parents who say yes but five minutes later in front of me speak to their child in their mother tongue.*

*Hamburg, Parent 2: I have big problems at home. My first child, we can speak Dari at home, we don't have to speak any other languages, my two children both speak German at home. Always. My husband and I say you shouldn't speak German at home because German at home, because the mother speaks [ ] very slowly. My daughter, my older daughter is fourteen, not thirteen. Maybe she can't make another word, my Dari word, mix it with, mix it with the German mother tongues.*

These examples show that the issue of languages can be a sensitive topic in the contact between families and schools, a topic that can give rise to tensions and misunderstandings. In the first quote, we can see the development in the discourse of the teacher, who, on the one hand, says that it is important and positive that the parents pass on their mother tongue, and he praises the advantages of bilingualism. On the other hand, shortly afterwards, he says that parents should play the game of speaking the school language with their children outside the home, if they have the language skills, so that their children can practice the school language more frequently. He doesn't understand why some parents do not play this "game", as he calls it.

In some cases, families mention a discrepancy between their family language policy (the need to continue using L1) and the institutional language policy. The way in which school staff talk about languages (the language of the school and the languages of the families) varies according to their training and experience in terms of plurilingual approaches, but also according to their linguistic skills and their openness to languages. This is the reason why opening up school for families seems important from a truly collaborative, bottom-up perspective.

During focus group interviews with parents in Hamburg, a mother from an African country discusses with the researcher the challenges she encounters while assisting her children with homework. During this conversation, she shares her efforts to overcome these challenges by actively working on enhancing her proficiency in the German language. In doing so, she portrays herself as both a learner of the language and a proactive social agent, as this excerpt of the focus group interview illustrates (P2 and P3 being two mothers in the group):

*Hamburg, excerpt of focus group interview (S: interviewer; P2: mother; P3: mother)*

*S: And you? Can you help your children with their homework if it's in German?*

*P3: No, I can't [ ] in German.*

*S: No?*

*P3: No. Now go to the uh German course here anytime [ ]*

*P2: First class is okay.*

*S: Are you doing a German course?*

*P3: Yes, now yes. I'm doing a German course, yes. But I did it once and I didn't manage it, I only managed A2 and then, uh.*

*S: But A2 is already very good.*

*P3: Yes, A2, yes, I did A2 and then I repeated it again now, yes.*



In this sequence, the mother explains that she is currently attending a German course in Hamburg, indicating her commitment to improving her German language skills to be able to help her children at school. She signals a proactive effort, reflecting on her progress, mentioning that she completed A2 level but struggled after that. This excerpt shows the intertwined efforts of parenting and language learning. Additionally, it shows how the mother's language learning journey is motivated by a wish to collaborate with the school in assuring the academic success of her children. Very similar motivations emerge from the interview with this mother, who has two children at the pre-school (aged 3 and 5) and who herself arrived in France 6 years ago from Anatolia without speaking a word of French at the time:

*Franche-Comté, mother A: It's for language. I want to learn the language.*

*Interviewer: Which language do you want to learn first?*

*Interpreter translates the answer of the mother: French of course! French for sure. I always want to go, that is to say I always want to learn, I have this curiosity. I went for 5 months. Everything I'm able to speak at the moment I learnt in the space of 5 months.*

*(When she says she wants to go, it's to school, to learn the language)*

*Mother's interpreter continues his translation: She says she would like / a stable environment for her children to really learn French, but really to learn the French language well.*

## 5.2 Voices about home-school relationship

When our interviewees talk about languages they also often talk about the relationship between home and school because the place and the role of their languages might be negotiated between these partners in the education system. In this section, we give voices to the conception of this home-school relationship by integrating a reflection about the strategies needed in order to empower both partners of the home-school relationship, and, first of all, newly arrived emergent bilingual pupils in pre- and primary school. Teachers and their assistants working in schools in Hamburg and Franche-Comté underline the importance of the participation and involvement of parents in school, as shown below:

*Franche-Comté, pedagogical assistants in pre-school (ATSEM8): And having parents come into the school to spend half an hour with us reassures them because parents are generally afraid of school too and even more so parents of children who don't speak French.*

At the same time some interviewees evoke that not all the parents are able to assume their role, as visible in this excerpt from the German context:

*Hamburg, Teacher: At first, people don't even realise or know how school works here and how much participation is needed. In most of the countries these people come from, there's no involvement from parents or the school and they have to be so involved, so present. They are surprised that parents' evenings are organised so regularly. In the countries they come from, they are called into school once when the child has really got into mischief and only then, yes, and that's it in terms of communication or cooperation with parents and school.*

This quote highlights a significant cultural difference (and expectations from school staff) in parental involvement in education between the context in question (likely a Western or European country) and the countries some of these families come from. The quote evokes the cultural variation in parental involvement, showing that in Germany (and we could extend it to the French context as well) there is a strong expectation of regular and active participation from parents in their children's schooling. This involvement would include attending frequent parents' evenings and engaging in continuous communication and cooperation with the school. A second get-away message from this quote is that both parties, school and families, feel surprised about the mismatch (the acquired experiences taken for granted and the new context) and cope with adaptation. For

families, this would mean that, in their home countries, parental involvement in the educational process may be less common and may occur primarily when there are disciplinary issues or significant problems with students' behaviour or academic performance. From this perspective, what seems to be important is a mutual adjustment to educational practices, norms, and expectations. As a result, on the one hand, families from different cultural backgrounds may need time to understand and adapt to the new expectations and practices of the host country's educational system, and, on the other hand, teachers might need to adjust to newcomers and to their frameworks. This becomes particularly critical when family members themselves have not had the opportunity to attend school. In Hamburg, a mother from the Middle East expressed that she faced challenges in collaborating with the school. Apart from linguistic barriers, she highlighted her lack of prior school experience in her home country ("Parent 2: No, no, no, I wasn't able to attend school").

Nevertheless, the need for the school structure and staff to adapt to new needs and contexts is far less stressed than the needs for the families to accommodate to the new rules. The following interview excerpt illustrates how parents are said to be welcomed together with their children, and how a climate of trust can be established by the teacher approaching the parents. The following illustrates the headmaster's perspective on enabling as much verbal exchange with families as possible:

*Franche-Comté, Headmaster: At the beginning of the year, parents are welcomed into the classrooms with the children. And then we do a staggered start: we have a start for the little section and the week after that it's the very young ones so that we can talk to the parents and then have exchanges and the children get used to not too many people in the classroom. And then I stand at the classroom door to have an exchange with them on each outing in fact and then they can see me when they wish.*

In preschool in France, children are accompanied by an adult (family member, babysitter, etc.) to the classroom and are also picked up from there. These daily interactions, including small talk between parents and teachers, along with participation in school excursions and festivities, provide opportunities for informal exchanges, which can be crucial for successful inclusion.

In the German context, the headmaster of the primary school recognises first and foremost the overwhelming situation in which many families arrive to Germany and lists the diverse possibilities of supporting them. He discusses the anxiety many parents feel about the academic success of their children and how the school tries to reassure them: "Everything is fine. Don't worry about anything. Let the child go its own way. It's on the right path" (German headmaster reproducing conversation with families, the original grammar is preserved). Nevertheless, in some moments of the interview a vertical relationship between school and families is described, communication being something more sought after by the school than by the families:

*Hamburg, Headmaster: The question was how we reach the parents. (...) You have to assume that the people who are there know school very differently. For some of them, the importance of school in this form is ... not as ... important as it is needed here in our society. Others don't have such an understanding of it, so school education in other countries is also different. Others at least have an understanding that parents can get involved or that parents have a part to play in learning success. And it's very important to convey this, and many of them also realise that school is an authority in a foreign country where you don't even have a secure residence status. So our mentors break down barriers and build bridges so that more trust is created. That's how it actually works.*

In this excerpt, the headmaster frames parents' and school's expectations and educational cultures as different and even difficult to conciliate. His discourse is permeated by a construction of chronotopic differences between "them" and "us", "there" and "here". Communication flows mainly from school to parents and he, as the headmaster, feels responsible for it as being in charge of the school ("The question was how we reach the parents"). As in the French context, the need for the families to accommodate to the new school system is stressed with much more emphasis than the other way around, i.e. the need for the schools to accommodate the families.

### 5.3 Including "home" in the classroom and at school

The home-school relationship covers a whole range of formal and informal contacts as well as classroom activities integrating families in school (Krüger & Thamin, 2021). For this study, we were particularly interested in the discourse on these contacts and encounters at school. But we were also interested in teaching activities that explicitly involved the families. What experiences are made on both sides and what feedback do they provide?

In the French context, various practices aim at the integration of the families and their languages in school. For the very young children (two to three years old) we could see that the act of bringing the children's home lives, like pictures of the parents, is clearly an affective one (Krüger & Thamin, 2021). The reception of this kind of practices based on the children in the classroom, their languages and their families are positive both for the parents and the teaching staff. That kind of practices could, for example, be involved in language awareness projects, a pedagogical practice that has officially been part of pre-school programs since 2015 (MEN B.O. 26/03/2015). Integrating the parents and their languages into the classroom practices triggers affective reactions not only by the parents but also by the teachers and their assistants, as we can see in the following interview excerpts:

*Franche-Comté, mother from West Asia N: She'd asked me to come and introduce the Turkish language and say a few words to the pupils. So I took my time for that too, because I was the only Turk in my daughter's class. So I took an hour off work and went to present. Yes, they were interested.*

*Franche-Comté, pedagogical assistants in pre-school (ATSEM 8): And get the parents involved, I think that's great for the parents, for the children, and for the school itself. And over the year, well, create something with the parents. We have an end-of-year show on diversity, using postures and dance, but also songs we've learnt with the parents. In fact, the parents came to teach us songs in different languages, and I think that tomorrow there's the show, and I think that the parents, to see that in the end we used what they did, what they came to bring to the class, well for them, it's great. Because precisely the contact with the school, well there's a link that is formed, and we mustn't break this link.*

These extracts describe the valuable role of parent-teacher interactions, particularly in the context of families whose children may not be fluent in the language of instruction (in this case, French). When parents are invited to spend time at the school, such as during meetings or activities, it represents a source of reassurance for them and for their children. Many parents, especially those whose children are not proficient in the language of the school, may initially feel anxious or intimidated by the educational system. The act of teachers and educators inviting parents into the school is significant for breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of partnership. By physically being in the school together, parents are encouraged to stop seeing the school as an intimidating or inaccessible place, but rather as a collaborative environment where they can actively engage and feel safe.

*Franche-Comté, Translator of a mother from West Asia A: She says that they're very, very, very, very open at the nursery school, whether it's the teachers or the headmistress or everyone, and that her daughter is also happy that her mum comes to help, and she says that's something we might not find again in the first year of primary school.*

This mother underlines the good practices of the pre-school sector. Perhaps it could serve as an incentive to keep the school doors open to parents in all the other grades as well.

In the German context, participants did not actively report experiences of bringing home life into the classroom settings. However, this does not imply a lack of willingness among participants to integrate families into school life or for parents to actively participate. In the following excerpt, we witness a family unit demonstrating agency to support a specific member of the family:

*Hamburg, excerpt of focus group interview (S: interviewer; T6: the daughter of an mother from the Middle East coming to the focus group, she translates for her mother)*

*S: Okay. And um did the school always communicate so transparently with your family about your performance?*

*P6: Yes, well, we always had parents' evenings. Always after every half year, mostly after every year. I can't remember that exactly. It was ten years ago, but my mum, my brother.*

*(...)*

*P6: So they were there at the parents' evening, for example.*

*(T6's mother speaks in Farsi)*

*P6: Yes and er exactly. When there was parents' evening, my older brother was always there. My mum was there too, but he translated. Um exactly um something like that.*

*S: Did your brother take on this task so spontaneously or what? Are you going there?*

*P6: No, I told him, no, I told him he was happy to come. I always asked him mhm. So I asked: 'Can you come? We have a parents' evening that day.' Then he said: 'Yes, I'd love to.' Then he came.*

It is clear that all family members are proactive in supporting academic success. T6 mentions that her older brother played a crucial role during parents' evenings, acting as a translator for their mother who speaks Arabic. This suggests a language barrier that the family is navigating but also (and foremost) her collective agency to show commitment and to fit into a school culture where parents' participation is valued. More specifically, T6 takes the initiative to involve her brother in the communication process, asking him to attend parents' evenings and act as a translator, showing agency in ensuring effective communication with the school. The family's collaborative effort, with the older brother translating for the mother to support the younger sister, underscores a collective approach to overcoming language barriers and actively participating in school-related discussions.

## 6. Discussion

The findings, based on the interview analysis, indicate that fostering collaboration between schools and families should follow a two-way design: first, ensure that parents and children maintain and enrich their unique perspectives and values and, second, ensure that they effectively engage with the new educational system. The central role of educational staff is crucial in navigating between these two paths, rather than solely focusing on guiding them along the second (Komur-Thillooy & Paprocka-Piotrowska, 2016; Leclaire & Perregaux, 2016). Likewise, educational staff must try to understand this dual role, without seeing paths as paradoxical and contradictory, but as two sides of the same coin (García, 2009; Melo-Pfeifer et al., 2024; Mary & Young, 2021; Moro, 2012;

Thomauske, 2017). To this end, the data presented seems to point to the need for transparency about intentions, obstacles, and frustrations on both sides.

The analysis of the three emerged themes in both corpora shows some cross-context commonalities. As we could see, families and school in both settings refer to family and educational/school language policies that may be in competition/tension. Families mentioned a discrepancy between their family language policy (the need to continue using L1) and the institutional language policy (German or French as the language of schooling). Families and school staff tend to see language problems and different cultures of participation as barriers to family engagement in school life, despite all the efforts put by the families in learning the language of the host countries. School staff in both contexts seem to perceive families as more than individuals lacking language skills in the languages of the majority. Families are also seen as needing to overcome structural barriers to integration in the host country. Similarly, families describe themselves as active language learners, and converge in the sense that their difficulties are not exclusively linked to language issues, but also to different school traditions as well as to little or no previous contact with schools in their country of origin.

Overall, considering the literature review, this empirical study highlights the necessity for cultural sensitivity and awareness in educational contexts, especially when working with families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Asdih, 2012; Melo-Pfeifer et al., 2024). It emphasises the importance of providing support and guidance to help newcomer families navigate the expectations of the host country's education system and to help schools establish a more horizontal communicative relationship with the families. This exploratory study also underlines the importance of approaching the normative discourse regarding collaboration between schools and families with a sense of context and relativity. Such discourses, discussed in the general presentation of the legislation in France and Germany, show a general assumption that such a cooperation is good for all, regardless of the specificities of the families or the schools. Against this backdrop, our results underscore the need to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and recognize the nuances of each situation when discussing the necessity, forms, and optimal methods of collaboration between educational institutions and families (Melo-Pfeifer et al., 2024). Additionally, the study highlights the importance of active engagement of educators with parents, especially those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, regardless of who initiates communication. It emphasizes the role of educators not only in teaching students but also in supporting and reassuring parents as they navigate the education system in a foreign language context. Nevertheless, this engagement should not be merely one-directional; it should support bidirectional engagement, building relationships based on reciprocity.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite differences between the two contexts and research designs, which we highlighted earlier, some commonalities in the findings can be described. As the literature review and the analysis of the data have showed, there is a positive perception of cooperation between families and schools, both at the legislative and practical level.

The data collected in both national contexts shed light on two significant aspects: first, the complex relationship between families and schools, which goes beyond language or involvement, encompassing intricate and multifaceted dynamics in terms of cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and educational issues. Secondly, there is a need to articulate classroom language policies and family language policies, defining how language is used and valued within the school setting and how it interacts with its perception and usage within students' homes. In essence, the study urges educators, policymakers, and researchers to move beyond rigid, normative ideas of collaboration and recognise the intricacies of family-school relationships. Additionally, it emphasises the

importance of aligning classroom language policies with the language practices and values of students' families to create a more inclusive and effective educational environment.

Finally, the results of this study indicate that, to facilitate families' transition to a new school culture through school-family cooperation, the following are necessary: i) language skills, which are necessary but not sufficient on both sides; ii) understanding the differences between the school cultures in contact is an important asset; iii) expectations of school and extracurricular cooperation should be made more transparent; iv) schools and families should work together to coordinate educational and family language policies; and v) schools and families should cooperate to prepare parents for their children's transition from one level of schooling to another. While the analysis did not explicitly address this last point, we can infer that collaboration between teachers and families with a migrant and refugee background is indispensable in preparing parents and children for the transition between schooling levels. This importance is derived from the various themes explored. On one hand, teachers play a vital role in offering insights into the educational system, cultural nuances, and expectations across different schooling levels. This guidance enables families to navigate the educational landscape more effectively. On the other hand, the collaborative relationship with teachers empowers parents to fully comprehend the processes, requirements, and expectations associated with their children's education throughout their school path.

### Endnotes

- 1) The French team has been working over the last few years to improve the reception of pupils who do not speak the school language, and they created a website about being bilingual in pre-school and primary school: <https://bilem.ac-besancon.fr>. On this website, teachers find help regarding the framework and the multilingual communication with families.
- 2) Inspection générale de l'éducation, du sport et de la recherche (2021). Les relations École-famille : état des lieux et axes de progrès. N° 2021-157 septembre 2021. [https://www.ozp.fr/IMG/pdf/2021-157\\_rapport\\_relation\\_ecole\\_famille.pdf](https://www.ozp.fr/IMG/pdf/2021-157_rapport_relation_ecole_famille.pdf).
- 3) At this point, it should be stated that the researcher conducting the interviews with parents also has German as a second language.
- 4) They are called in French "L'agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles" what means in English "Territorial agent specialized in nursery schools". They are a kind of assistants to the pre-school teachers in terms of pedagogy, student hygiene, and tidying and cleaning the classroom.

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