



How do teachers evaluate their parent communication competence? Latent profiles and relationships to workplace behaviors



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HIGHLIGHTS

- 677 German mathematics-teachers evaluated their parent communication competence.
- 24% showed high, 36% medium and 16% showed lower competence with balanced profiles.
- 24% exhibited a focus on problem solving in communication with parents.
- Higher competence related to more exchange with colleagues on parent-issues.
- Competence did not relate to time spent working with parents.

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ABSTRACT

Parent-teacher communication competence, frequency of exchange on parent-related issues with colleagues and time spent working with parents were measured with questionnaires in a sample of 677 German mathematics teachers. A latent class analysis revealed four groups of teachers: 24% showed high, 36% showed medium and 16% showed lower levels of communication competence with balanced profiles. A fourth profile (24%) showed a strong focus on pragmatic problem solving in communication with parents. The profiles differed in the extent of their exchange with colleagues on parent-related issues. No relationships were found regarding the time spent talking to parents.

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1. Introduction

Talking to parents is an important task that teachers face in their everyday work (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hertel, Bruder, Jude, & Steinert, 2013; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Hornby, 2011; Lasky, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Walker & Dotger, 2012). The relevance of this task is underscored by current reports of parents acting in more and more demanding ways when meeting teachers (Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009; Wilhelm, Esdar, & Wild, 2014). Moreover, teachers' communication competencies are operationalized and depended upon as the primary resource for establishing effective family-school

partnerships (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).

The international literature reflects that teachers are poorly prepared for the communication aspect of their professional work, especially regarding interactions with parents (Aich, 2011 [GER]; Dotger, 2010 [US]; Evans, 2013 [US]; Epstein, 2013 [US]; Hornby & Witte, 2010 [NZ]; Lemmer, 2012 [ZA]; Neuenschwander et al., 2005 [CH]; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012 [CY]). This is also documented in a survey of 60 teacher education programs in 22 different federal US-states (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). It was found that only 23% of the programs allowed teacher candidates to interact with families during field experiences (cf. also Walker & Dotger, 2012; Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerkhof, 2009). A seldom explicated consequence of this situation is that teachers are challenged to acquire and develop the necessary communication competencies through informal learning processes associated with their everyday work (e.g., Billett, 2001; Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005).

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The present study investigates the competence of teachers to master challenges that arise from talking to parents. We pose three research questions: (i) Which competence profiles¹ emerge from teachers' self-evaluations of their parent-communication competence? To investigate this question, we draw upon a recent model (Gartmeier, Bauer, Fischer, Karsten, & Prenzel, 2011) which conceptualizes three facets of teachers' parent-communication competence, namely creating a positive interpersonal relationship, solving problems in conversation and structuring the conversation. These facets were represented through nine questionnaire items which were used to differentiate patterns in teachers' responses through latent class analysis. Moreover, we assume that teachers develop their parent-communication competence mainly through informal, workplace based learning processes (Grosemans, Boon, Verclairen, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2015). Therefore, we operationalize teachers' parent-communication competence in relation to the extent to which they engage in workplace behaviors. Our further research questions are how teachers' parent-communication competence relates to (ii) the degree to which they talk with colleagues about their interactions with parents and (iii) the amount of time they actually spend on meeting parents? For all analyses, we draw upon questionnaire data that was collected in a large-scale study in German secondary schools.

In the following, the background literature that undergirds this study will be outlined. We examine the role of teachers as communicators with a focus on interactions with parents and on basis of the literature on family-school partnerships. Then, we draw upon the informal learning paradigm to examine the relevance of this competence from a workplace learning perspective.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Teacher-parent communication as core practice in the context of family-school partnerships

Recent research and theorization stresses the role of teachers as versatile communicators (Kierner, Gröschner, Pehmer, & Seidel, 2014; Wubbels, den Brok, Veldman, & van Tartwijk, 2006). Little is yet known, however, about how (well) teachers actually perform in this area of their work. In fact, teachers have to interact in professional ways in a multitude of different situations with (groups of) students, colleagues, parents as well as with external stakeholders of school education (e.g. representatives of political or economic institutions). Among these contexts, teacher-parent communications are often described as particularly important (Epstein, 2010), but also as challenging encounters (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Before exploring the nature of these encounters, we embed the present study in current discourses around parent involvement and family-school partnerships.

In the latter field of research, the importance of parent-teacher communication is stressed (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; de Bruïne et al., 2014). The degree to which parents get actively involved in school partnership practices is robustly predicted by different teacher variables, namely their sensitivity towards aspects related to parents' ethical and multicultural background (Dotger, 2010), their awareness of the emotional geographies between teachers and parents (Hargreaves, 2000) and their parent communication competencies (Denessen et al., 2009; Symeou et al., 2012). Evidence indicates that pupils benefit if teachers manage to establish and maintain positive relationships to parents, e.g. on the academic

level (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Carter, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). This evidence supports the relevance of our study, which is best described as a person-centered approach in the context of family-school-partnerships. In line with Epstein (2010), we argue that each individual teacher can reach out to parents, invite them to exchange perspectives and observations, negotiate evaluations, and, if necessary, develop ideas for how to solve existing problems. This means we conceptualize parent-teacher communication as a core practice within family-school partnerships. Specifically, our study rests on the premise that, "well-developed communicative skills are (...) crucial for teachers to create strong links with parents and to enable parental involvement at school" (Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg & Kerkhof, 2009, p. 29).

In examination of the aspects of parental involvement which have been shown to make a difference with regard to student achievement, some may be influenced through direct interactions between parents and teachers: According to the meta-analysis by Jeynes (2007), the most influential aspect is parental expectations (effect size = .88, $p < .000$). Encounters between parents and teacher commonly "are organized around teachers' presentation of up-to-date evaluations of student progress, with participants working to achieve mutual understanding about and basic agreement over these evaluations" (Pillet-Shore, 2015, p. 374). The assumption is hence plausible that such exchanges influence parental expectations. In discussing barriers to parental involvement, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) highlight several related aspects that teachers may shape and influence in communication with parents. As teachers work to explicitly value parents' involvement, they can stress that it helps them to get a more complete picture of a child and better understand its situation. While some parents may lack confidence in their own ability to help their child succeed academically, teachers can encourage parents to show interest in their children's learning. They can raise parents' awareness that they may support their children, no matter what their own academic background looks like.

As will be shown in the following, we conceptualize teacher-parent meetings as discourses shaped by differences between participants' emotional involvement with the particular child, who is the subject of the conversation. This is plausible as the participating teacher and parent know the child from different contexts and across differing periods of time. These conversational partners have very different roles inside and outside of the school system and, thus, typically differ in their responsibilities for supporting the child (Katz, 1984; Keyes, 2004). Drawing upon this sketch of their initial constellation, situations of teacher-parent communication can further be described as conversations which are typically focused on the current situation of a child at school. In cases where this situation is perceived as problematic, retrospective (e.g., *how could it come to this situation?*) and prospective (e.g., *how could it be improved?*) questions are discussed. These discussions are shaped by mutual expectations the conversational partners have for each other, by differing responsibilities and power relations. Other questions, ones that are explicitly discussed, revolve around whether the parties meet situationally constructed ideals of "the good parent", "the good teacher" and "the good student" (Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Pillet-Shore, 2015). Traditionally, parents and teachers meet in the context of parent-teacher conferences (Allen, 2008). These are "purposeful conferences where the parent and the teacher schedule a meeting to discuss a particular topic, such as academic progress, behavior or an individualized remedial programme" (Lemmer, 2012, p. 83).

To sum up, Bakker, Denessen, and Brus-Laeven (2007) suggest that research on parent involvement could benefit from a better

¹ The terms "profile" and "class" are used as synonyms in the present article in order to label the outcomes of the latent class analysis reported here.

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