

# Educators' views on parents' participation on three different identified levels

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**ABSTRACT:** Ongoing discussions emphasize parents' participation as a pivotal element of early childhood education. In this paper, we will discuss the challenges to supporting parents' participation in Finnish day care centres. The article is based on the qualitative inquiry (2011) about parents' and staff participation in the metropolitan area day care centres. The participants were 1,588 working teams representing 5,262 employees. The questionnaire was returned by 77.6% of the intended population.

The results showed, there were roughly three different respondent groups. Most of them listed different matters in which parents could not participate, but they thought that there were also some areas, in which parents could participate more than they do today. Some of the respondents had a broader view on those issues, and they thought that it is possible to support parents participating in the day care centre. Indeed, some of the respondents thought that if parents came along to the activities in the day care centres, it would complicate and disturb the work of professionals. The different attitudes concerning how educator's view their selves in relation to the parents become apparent and three different groups were identified: the Professional standpoint, Customer standpoint, and Partnership standpoint.

**Keywords:** *Parent-teacher partnership, participation, early childhood education*

## ***Introduction***

The issue of how to support parents' participation in educational institutions has attracted considerable attention in recent years (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake, 2009) and the importance of understanding the different parent-professional collaborations has emerged as an essential topic in early childhood education (Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003; Woodruff and O'Brien, 2005). Parents' participation in their children's day care is closely related to educational partnership (*parent-teacher partnership*). The partnership means collaboration and describes the concept and the relationship between two parties. It includes a two-to-one listening, respect, trust and dialogue (Kaskela & Kekkonen, 2006).

Characteristic of Finnish early childhood education practices and pedagogy is that it combines care, education and teaching into the daily activities as whole, aimed at promoting children's balanced growth, development and learning (The National curriculum guidelines on ECEC in Finland, 2005). In addition, during the day in day care centre, children receive three meals, the small children have a nap, and all children take part in outdoor activities. On average, a child spends about nine hours per day in the day care centre (Statistics Finland, 2009).

In Finland, childcare was until year 2013 administered under the Ministry of Social and Health Affairs and not under the Ministry of Education as it is in most other countries. The Day Care Act of 1973 is still valid and aimed to give mothers possibility to go to work and guide educators to support parents in raising their children. Thus, childcare was perceived as mainly a social service for parents, not as the first stage of the general education system or life-long learning for all citizens. Many documents concerning early childhood education and care describe family as weak or lacking the ability to raise up children properly (Onnismäa, 2010). Only the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in 2003 introduced the concept of partnership between parents and educators. That new concept has brought about positive change in attitudes toward partnership and parent participation.

Supporting parents' participation can be seen as important for several reasons. First, parents' involvement in day care is based on their right to act as primary educators to their children and the ones with responsibility in relation to their child. Educational partnerships emphasize parents' understanding about their own child (Kaskela & Kekkonen, 2006). Secondly, early childhood education practices affect not only a child's growth and development, but also his/her family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989). Thirdly, increasing parental involvement in early childhood education by listening to them and by providing them with opportunities to influence to their child's day, is expected in the Finnish socio-political view; it enhances and improves the quality of early childhood education (Hujala, 1999). Fourthly, a good interaction between parents

and educators provides parents the basis for positive experiences concerning their children and their education (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

One of the main findings in the literature concerning parents' participation has been that when people consider a partnership relationship, they often mainly focus on the physical participation of parents in parents' committees, and joint family events with other parents. The literature often ignores the import of daily discussions between educators and parents. (McGrath, 2007.) Nummenmaa and Karila (2011) use the term educational interaction when they discuss interaction in social situations with parents and among the teams in a day care centre. According to them, such interactions contain thoughts, feelings and actions. Professionals, as well as parents, bring their own views and feelings to the discussions, no matter where they occur. Parents' participation is a multifaceted issue, in which educators have a significant role, because they are authoritarian in relation to the children. Teachers' developmental philosophy, self-efficacy, school policies and teachers' perception on the efficiency of teacher-parent partnership can either support partnership or hinder it (Kim 2009). The parent-teacher partnership is formed on the basis of both parents' and educators' perceptions. Alasuutari (2010) has made research on teacher-parent partnership in conversations held when drawing up a child's individual educational plan and findings indicate that it can be found a horizontal and vertical frame. The vertical frame can be seen as a hierarchical relationship as the horizontal frame resembles more equal partnership between educators and parents.

As partnership needs two parties it is likely that the behaviour of another will affect the act of the other party. According to Tauriainen (2000) parents' perceptions about their parent-teacher partnership in Finnish day-care centres can be divided into four types: withdrawn parents, parents as customers, parents as assistants, and empowered parents. Empowered parents were willing to talk about their home experiences concerning education and participate in the education at the day care centre, whereas withdrawn parents behaved quite the opposite. Assistants want to share their home experiences and desire to participate in day care centre activities, but they underestimate their own abilities to contribute. Customers, in contrast to assistants, want to participate in the centre activities, but only from a distance, and they do not like to discuss the topic of educational activities that take place at home (Tauriainen, 2000). Niikko and Havu-Nuutinen (2009) and Purola (2011) found out that even the active Finnish parents were content with partnership models in use even though they were not able to influence pedagogical methods. Quite the opposite Finnish educators seem to have a negative perception of parents' abilities and willingness to participate in day care (Purola, 2011). They tend to see parents in a passive way as opposed to teachers in Estonia, Lithuania, Norway and Portugal (Hujala et al., 2009).

It is a challenge to parent-teacher participation that Finnish teachers have a tendency to suggest that parents leave their children's education to professionals at the day care (Hujala et al., 2009). Moreover, contemporary public discourse in Finland has increased about the duty of educators to support and intervene in a child's family life when parenting difficulties emerge. Parents are seen as the service consumers of the service of education for their children (Venninen, Leinonen, Hämäläinen & Purola, 2011) and teachers as the helping professionals, located somewhat 'above' parents (as all-knowing professionals). At the same time, this discourse strengthens teachers' opinion, as mentioned earlier, that teachers need special skills to work effectively in responding to diverse family contexts. Indeed, more than teachers in the Estonia, Lithuania, Norway and Portugal, Finnish teachers stress that they need different skills with various families (Hujala et al., 2009). This idea is based on the notion that educators must pay attention to every parent as an individual and make use of this information in the education plan of the child to relate this information to the co-operation (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Nowadays educators understand the challenges of supporting parents' participation, and the information required to answer such questions as what kind of cooperation the day care centre staff themselves desire is still lacking. In this article, we are looking for answers to questions about the kind of cooperation that exists between parents and the day-care-centre staffs in the metropolitan area of Finland. Initially, we present the role of the parents in contrast to the ideas of the staff. Finally, we will focus on the changes described by the respondents, which have already been made in order to increase the participation of parents.

## ***Methods***

This article is based on the inquiry (2011) about parents' and staff participation in the metropolitan area day care centres (Venninen, Leinonen, Rautavaara-Hämäläinen & Purola 2011). The participation was explained through eleven questions, six of them focused on the conceptions of the staff about parents' participation in the day care centres. In this article, we will focus on the results via the next questions:

1. What kind of activities are there in which parents' participation is not desirable?
2. To what kind of matters, concerning day care, have the staff have asked for parents' input?
3. What changes, improvements, or trials has the staff made to support parents' participation?

Through these questions we were focusing on the attitudes of the staff concerning the participation of parents. Other three questions were: 1) About what matters do parents make initiatives and how often? 2) To what kind of matters did their initiatives affect? 3) What kind of barriers there are in the day care centre concerning parent's participation?

The study was based on a self-report questionnaire designed to measure day-care educators' beliefs and conceptions of the challenges to supporting parent's participation. The questionnaire was part of a development project VKK-Metro of children's participation in early childhood education conducted with University of Helsinki and the communal daycare of metropolitan area cities. Questionnaire was part of data collection of project to provide evidences about children's, parent's and staff's participation and its supporting by educators in day care centers. Results about how these evidences were used in this development project have been published elsewhere (e.g., Venninen, Leinonen, Ojala & Lipponen 2012). The study was conducted among teams, because teams plan and carry out the daily program in day-care centers and are the basic functional and pedagogical units of the day-care centers. The participants were 1,588 working teams representing 5,262 employees. The questionnaire was returned by 77.6% of the intended population.

The content analysis of the transcribed qualitative data was done inductively. The researchers classified the data thematically and coded it into easily interpretable parts. The unit analysed was a thought consisting of a single word, phrase or several phrases. The personal voice of the respondents was emphasized to maintain the strong subjectivity to the results (see Dey, 1993). Each mention was coded with a 'meaning of idea' title by using Atlas TI 6.1 software. Some of the code names appeared close to 200, some only dozens. After that, those meanings of ideas were classified according to the common features and named. These were the classes, which were further classified to the more abstract level, which were the main classes (See Robson, 2002).

Finally, all the data was encoded again through the main classes and quantified. It was helpful to address the large data with different word searches and through it to cross check that no codes were left without marks. The quantifying above helped the researchers to perceive the whole (see Ward, 2010).

## Results

The findings are presented according to the research questions. Next, we focus on the things that, according to the respondents, are not covered by the parents. After that, we describe about what kind of matters have professionals asked the opinions of parents. And finally, what changes or improvements has the staff made in order to support parents' participation. The headlines describe the wholes of the answers in question.

## Parents should stay in their own role

Many tasks in day care centres are defined only for educational people (see the educational responsibility, secrecy). In addition, traditional practices guide the views of the staff members. As has been previously reported, respondents were asked in which activities they did not want parents to participate.

Activities in which parents are not allowed to participate included distributed management and issues that need early childhood knowledge in order to manage. Mentions relating to management concerned, largely, human resources management. *"Personnel policy belongs to the day care centre director." "Similarly, matters concerning annual holidays have to be out of parents' control. Indeed, even setting the office hours of the day care centre is a matter to which parents should not say anything."*

Personnel management inside the day care centre is connected with other decisions concerning the activities in the day care centre. One respondent stated, *"Personnel matters are not the concern of parents"* nor are the children's approvals to the day care program. Parents should not participate in such matters, nor should they be concerned with the assignment of children to certain activities inside the day care centre. One respondent stated, *"... [the] formation of groups of children and the choices of play mates [is up to the staff]. The staff has experience with children's reciprocal relationships!"*

According to the respondents, the activities that demand specific pedagogical skills in early childhood education are those in which parents cannot participate. These include among others, the pedagogical design issues. One staff member spoke about planning activities, *"We will make a decision in which age-appropriate activities a child will engage and on what schedule."* Another respondent noted, *"We are unable to allow the parents to become involved in planning the agenda of the day."* Confidential matters came to the fore in many responses; people spoke about, *"... the kinds of things that are bounded by confidentiality regulations."* The following quote describes an absolute position, while at the latter quote parents are also highlighted.

*Parents do not participate in pedagogical design, because most of them do not have the schooling, experience, or time for it. The presence of the parents undermines the authority of the staff, so it is difficult for the child to know if he or she should obey the parents or the staff.*

*Pedagogical competence is part of the competence of personnel with special skills, who also bear the responsibilities of the decisions. Parents' aspects should be taken into account, but the trained professional staff is responsible for planning their own work. The day-care centre also has a number of commonly agreed rules and methods.*

The respondents do not want the parents to be involved in the design of the learning environment. One person noted, *"... reworking the learning environment. The idea is based on the fact that staff has received training on the issue in question. Similarly, parents*

*cannot know the individual needs of the group/children. Furthermore, parents are not experienced with supporting the social relations between the children."*

Daily routines form an area in which the staff generally does not want parents to be physically involved, as one has stated, *"Daily routine-situations, such as parental presence at meals, may interfere with children's concentration."* Naps appeared to be an area in which a high proportion of the respondents wanted to work without parents, according to this statement, *"At the day care starting, coming to the sleeping room, the children behave more restlessly in the presence of the parents than they do with staff members;"* *"Children's rest is important so that children have uniform routines when they are going to sleep (at home families can have many different ways of putting children to sleep)."* The daily rhythm was considered to be an issue, in which parents should not be allowed to participate, *"The group of children, the staff shifts, and the mealtimes should dictate the daily schedules, not the parents."* Safety issues were also highlighted. *"Child safety during the day [is important.]. Day care centre staff must respond to the children throughout the day in all situations."*

In summary, we can say that there were roughly three different respondent groups. Most of them listed different matters in which parents could not participate, but they thought that there were also some areas, in which parents could participate more than they do today, *"We have not supported parents to participate in planning the activities because it has not been mentioned until now."* Tauriainen study (2000) provides evidence that some of the parents' attitude towards cooperation is close to this way of thinking. According to her there are parents that act like assistants.

Some of the respondents had a broader view on those issues, and thought that it is possible to support parents participating in the day care centre, *". . . all issues can be discussed, at least."* Another stated, *"We didn't see any instances where it is impossible to support parents to participate in some way."* Some respondents even saw that there are no areas in which parents could not be involved, *"We think that parents can be involved in some way in all the activities of day care."* According to Tauriainen (2000) there are also parents that are empowered and willing to participate, indeed there are parents that are like customers, who want to participate from a distance.

Indeed, some of the respondents thought that if parents came along to the activities in the day care centres, it would complicate and disturb the work of professionals, *"Some parents are trying to participate too much in some activities."* Another stated, *"The day-care centre and home have different backgrounds, so parents' over-participation is not necessarily a good thing."* According to Tauriainen (2000) there are parents that are withdrawn and want to give professionals right to make all decisions. Niikko and Havu-Nuutinen (2009) also claim that some parents see an educator as the main authority to decide what is best for a child's at day care.

## **What role should parents play while participating in education?**

The way parents' opinions are solicited describes both the intended and unintended levels of issues staff wants parents to influence. Parent evenings turn out to be the events where parents' opinions were especially solicited and where parents had an opportunity to discuss issues with other parents. The questions that touched the entire day care centre were about parents' satisfaction with day care. A staff member noted, *"At the parents' evening; we asked parents to write down their most important concerns and wishes for us; we read the results together and discussed them and, for example, we agreed on how to celebrate birthdays."*

According to the staff, parents' opinions were enquired in dropping off and picking up situations as well as separately organized conversations (for example, during a child's individual educational plan discussions). A staff member noted, *"Often [we get information] in different situations during the conversations about the child's growth and development. A teacher might ask, "How is it with you at home? Has there been any help? He or she might also give parents practical advice."*

At the beginning of day care, the parents are also questioned regularly about their wishes concerning the child's care and its execution. Naptime, clothing, and eating were all topics that were frequently mentioned. Tidiness education had fewer mentions. A staff member noted, *"We have developed dressing boards for children where parents can mark special wishes concerning the child's dress."* Questions about the amount of outdoor time and temperature limits in cold weather or going out in bad weather are asked in some day care centres. One very commonly asked question was about different chargeable excursions and shows for which parents had to pay. The use and cost of xylitol pastilles or chewing gum were regularly enquired by staff.

As for the background information for the child's education, parents were questioned by staff regarding the child and his/her family. The information about the family was related to family culture, values, religion and educating principles. The information relating to the child concerned the child's interests, friendships, and development. There were also questions about the child's enjoyment of time at the day care and the child's home activities such as watching television or using a computer.

The respondents emphasized the different reciprocal relationship between the staff and parents. In the following figure, the different attitudes of staff concerning parents become apparent. Based on clues in the items mentioned in the survey, three different groups were identified: the Professional standpoint, Customer standpoint, and Partnership standpoint.



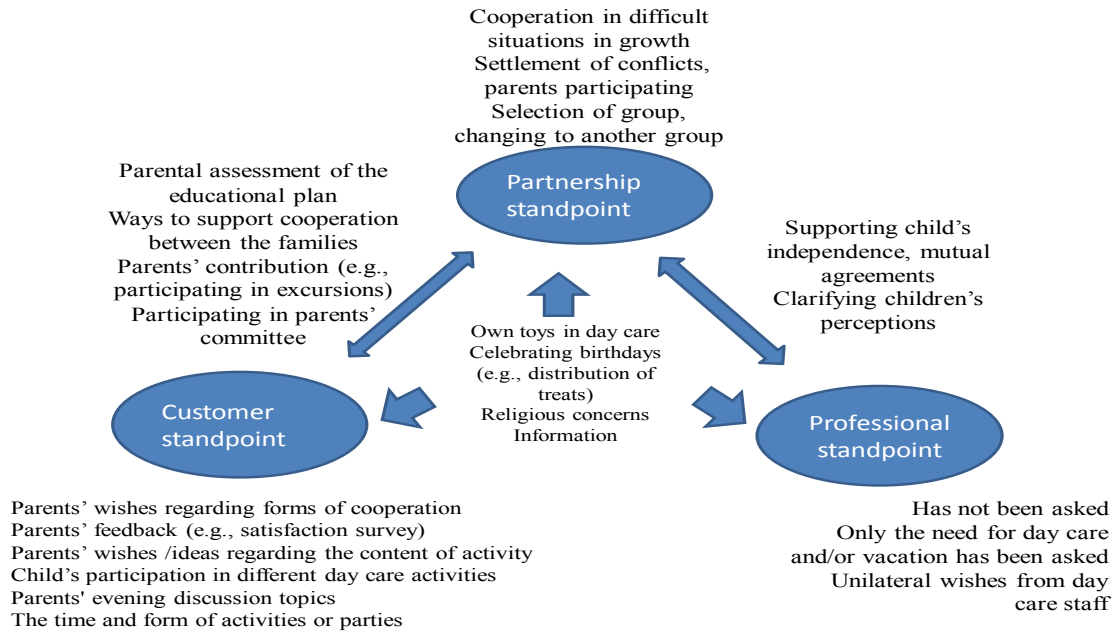


FIGURE 1 Respondents' views of how teachers view their selves in relation to the parents

The Customer standpoint emphasizes the parents' opinions and wishes, and the staff's actions striving to fulfil them as well as possible. Most of the parents' mentions are wishes concerning the child's care, such as dressing. There are also enquiries about children participating in different activities in day care. The mentions indicated that parents think they have quite a broad right to decide what activities in which their child will participate. The mentions were also associated with asking for parents' wishes and ideas.

The Professional standpoint is the opposite of the Customer standpoint and highlights the staff's professional capability and skills to decide what is right for each child. Teams that answered from this standpoint considered their professional mission to define a child's needs in every situation and they did not feel that they gained anything from the parents' opinions concerning education. This category includes the mentions that emphasize that parents' opinions were not asked. It also includes those mentions where parents were only asked about the needs at the day care centre and vacation schedules.

The Partnership standpoint highlights the staff's and parents' mutual activities and concerns in education. Parents and staff search together for solutions in various educational situations; for example, they discuss how to slowly accustom the child to being separated from the parents. Many mentions of this category concerned finding the best group for the child. The mutual consideration of educational dilemmas and solutions was mentioned frequently.

In order to understand the prevalence of the aspects we coded the data again using these three categories. The Customer standpoint was distinctly highlighted; there were 827 clear mentions in this category as can be seen in the following list.

*Concerns about the basic care of one's own child.*

*What kind of interactions do the parents want between staff and parents?[what are the] parents' wishes regarding the content of the activity, new ideas and for planning?*

*Feedback has been asked in everyday life: are parents content with the day care and group functioning?*

The standpoint second most emphasized was the Partnership standpoint, as there were 360 clear mentions.

*Tips on how to educate a challenging child (what is working at home, etc.) We have seen parents' role as a partner and an expert on their own child.*

*...sorting out conflicts between children, how to slowly accustom the child to be separated from parents, etc.*

*How parents see the haste in day care and how they could reduce haste through their own actions (has been discussed at a parents' evening meeting).*

There were 296 clear mentions from a Professional standpoint.

*Day care [is not issue of parents].*

*We have not asked [from parents].*

Parts of the mentions were written in such a form that more clarification was needed in order to define them clearly in one category. As it is, the category boundaries were vague and different mentions could have been included in another category; thus, some categories were emphasized more than others were.

Eight mentions could have been in any of the three categories, such as this one, “...raise funds for excursions and cultural events, because day care staff is not allowed to raise funds.” There were 345 mentions that could have equally been from either a Professional or Partnership standpoint. “In issues related to the child, in group activity planning.” Six mentions were from either the Partnership or the Professional standpoint, “What the child reports at home or has the child understood correctly such as possible conflict situations” and eight mentions were from either a Customer or Professional standpoint. “Day care procedures have been introduced to parents [by staff] and parents have approved them.”

The most frequent attitude toward the relationship between staff and parents is the Customer standpoint. Its frequency (45%) is as grand as all the other standpoints together (Partnership standpoint 19%, professional standpoint 16%).

## Toward partnership—changes in order to enable parents' participation

Figure 2 illustrates the procedures respondents have made to increase parents' participation in their day care centre. The Figure shows that most of the procedures are aimed at changing the education culture of the entire day care centre. Only one-fifth of the mentions describe a one-time action or activity such as family events and parties.

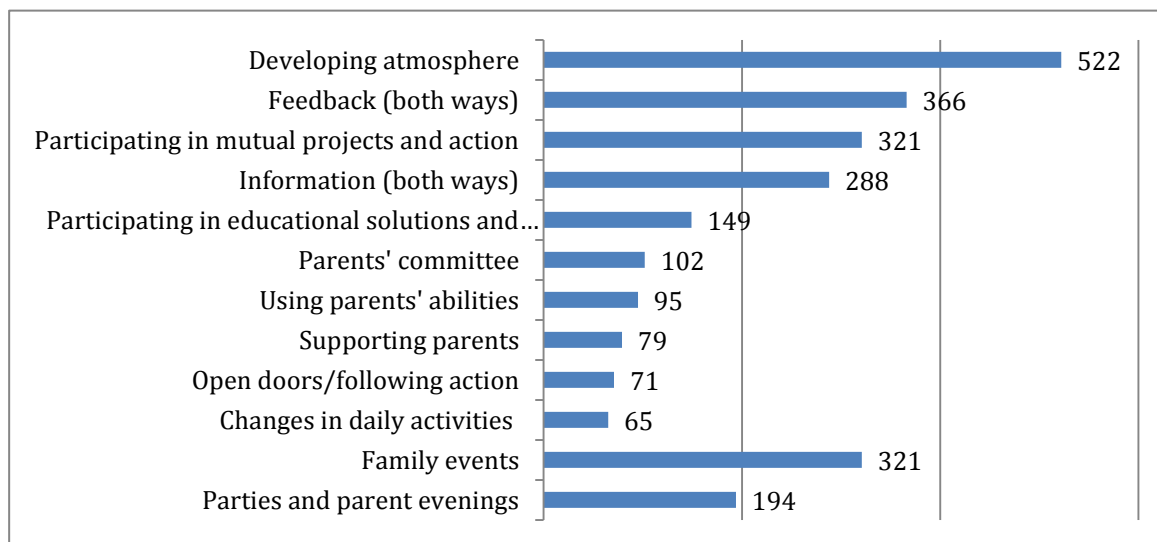


FIGURE 2 What changes have you made during the past school year to encourage parents' participation? (F=2573)

The items most highlighted by respondents involved atmosphere. The promotion of interaction between parents and staff was especially highlighted and new procedures were created for it (e.g., coffee time for parents). The utilization of the feedback contains direct feedback and fulfils the parents' wishes. The feedback was collected during unofficial meetings such as child pick--up and drop--off at day care or alternatively by different feedback and customer satisfaction surveys. The staff had also made suggestions to parents.

*Concentrating in the beginning of day care and taking the time to become familiar in a way that parents are present as much as possible and at every stage of the day can make it easier for parents to present concrete wishes and ask questions."*

*We try to contact parents every day and tell them what their child has done during the day even though they do not always ask about what has happened.*

Parents' participation at activity times and during various projects includes homework from day care and showing solidarity in implementing sustainable development. *"Parents have an opportunity to participate in all activities; our doors are open to parents."* Information was seen as very important partly as a means of developing communication with the parents and partly by gaining and exploiting information received from the parents. To participate in planning pedagogical solutions includes documentation in the ground of joint assessment with parents and participating in the reflection on group selection.

*In the monthly newsletter, parents were asked to bring stamps and carnival outfits for the children. The parents participate with pleasure and they are part of our daily life. Little things like that can be important.*

The exploitation of parents' capabilities reflects their essential output at day care, as one respondent reported, *"A parent organized a music event for the children."* Other events such as an excursion into the work place by parents or the sharing of materials for play or craft supplies were also mentioned.

Changes in everyday activities consist mostly of beginning the session at day care softly as a practice and naming the child's own caregiver, the exploitation of small-groups and changing inoperative routines. Work shifts, for instance, had been modified on the basis of received feedback, *"We have changed work shifts so that there is one "extra" person to discuss with parents when they are picking up their children, and we to keep that time calm so that it is possible to hold talks with them."*

The respondents had arranged family events of different kinds and modified parties and parents' evenings so that parents would have a more powerful and active role. One respondent noted, *"Parents evening was more interactive this year."* In some mentions, staff stated that, *"There has not been a need to make changes or try new experiments."*

### **Is there room for others on a hill?**

Ongoing discussions emphasize parents' participation as a pivotal element of early childhood education. In this paper, we have discussed the challenges to supporting parents' participation in Finnish day care centres.

The results indicate that the traditional methods of working with parents in day care centres include almost absolute adherence to parents' wishes about the child's clothing. However, the respondents do not want to support parents participating in situations where children are clothing for going out. They do not see parents' participation as necessary in matters of eating arrangements either, nor in tours or other activities. Indeed, they think that parents being involved in planning can cause confusion about the

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agreed procedures. On the other hand, some respondents thought that parents could participate in some way in all activities of the day care centre.

Hujala et al. (2009) assume that there are a number of stages in developing a partnership between parents and day care centre staff. The first steps may be established on the basis of informal discussions. The flow of information provides the basis for co-operation, which takes place when the different growth environments and contexts meet. This will create a picture of the child's behavior in different environments (cf. Kaskela & Lincoln, 2006). The respondents generally thought there is much room for improvement in the flow of information. The way in which educators share information, or leave without sharing it, give teachers more power, which they may not always realize themselves. On the other hand, parents can also use their power by not sharing information with educators (McGrath, 2007). According to the respondents, the staff was supposed to have invested heavily in information flow.

The researchers were particularly pleased to learn that so many day care staff members were focused on improving the interaction with parents in different situations. Constant interaction enables many topics to be addressed. It is also easier to share feedback on a variety of informal encounters. Likewise, when the interaction takes place in a variety of situations, it provides employees with the opportunity to be a natural way of interacting with the parents, who are into the role of a variety of ways (Tauriainen 2000).

Perhaps more staff directed activities are needed (Hujala et al., 2009). Common family events have traditionally allowed for parents and the whole family to share encounters. Respondents reported that they had altered the traditional parent meetings and celebrations to make them more inclusive. These changes are a great addition to everyday life in the day care centres. As time goes by, these informal interactions may lead to more active contributions from parents to the centres and empower parents as partners in the educational process (Hujala et al., 2009). Successful interactions between educators and children strengthen the trust of parents and make them want to cooperate (McGrath, 2007).

Our study demonstrated that professional responsibilities restricted parents to participate in practical activities. However, parents can become involved in a variety of homework assignments or joint projects. Confidence in early childhood education and educators is build up in everyday situations. Parents differ individually in their capacity to develop and maintain partnerships with teachers. This means that early childhood professionals need to develop a variety of flexible and family sensitive models for co-operation (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003).

As a result, the present research provides three different ways to characterize staffs' attitudes about parent's participation in day care: Customer standpoint, Partnership standpoint and Professional standpoint. We would see that each of these dimensions

should be included in the approach of early childhood professionals when they are working with children and families. If an educator plays the role of an expert, he or she needs to support the development of children and share that expertise in the discussions with parents. However, in a pure expert role, an educator can hide behind the professional role and "know" everything better than the parents do. Parents with withdrawal attitudes may be quite desired people among the professionally oriented staff, but it is important for us to remember that especially parents with withdrawal attitudes are at risk of becoming outsiders in their own parenthood (Hujala et al., 2009).

When the educators act through the Customer standpoint and meet a parent who operates from the Customer perspective, it is important for them to listen also their own professional thoughts. If educators meet the parents purely as customers, they may "forget" their expertise and responsibility, and experience success is only based on how happy they manage to make the children or the parents.

Partnership perspective encompasses the previous two standpoints. Professionals know their own knowledge and use it when interacting with parents and children. As an expert on childhood and children's development, they can apply their own expertise as necessary. When they share their own thoughts, they are also able to take advantage of the expert knowledge that the child has to offer. The educator is also able to take advantage of the expert knowledge that the child's parents have to provide them, because they know and understand their own child best. That's why the staff, who acquires the Partnership standpoint, seems to have best possibilities to cooperate successfully with all parents.

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