

# Parental involvement in Finnish day care—what do early childhood educators say?

Sevcan Hakyemez-Paul<sup>a,\*</sup>, Paivi Pihlaja<sup>a</sup>, Heikki Silvennoinen<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland*

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: [sevhak@utu.fi](mailto:sevhak@utu.fi)

Research conducted in recent decades shows that parental involvement plays a significant role in the academic achievement and the healthy development of children. Gaining a better understanding of early childhood educators' views and the reasons for insufficient practices is important for improving parental involvement. This mixed-method research investigates the views on parental involvement held by early childhood educators in Finland. A representative sample of 287 educators from Helsinki completed a questionnaire which provided quantitative data and qualitative material. The results show that Finnish early childhood educators have positive attitudes towards parental involvement and its various types in general. Learning at home is the most popular type of parental involvement. The participants state that difficulties in parental involvement are often caused by poor parental motivation and a lack of time on the part of both educators and parents.

Keywords: parental involvement; educators' views; early childhood education; parental involvement types; Finnish context

## Introduction

Early childhood is recognised as a developmentally crucial period for the entire lifespan (Sommer et al. 2013), and early childhood education (ECE) forms the foundation for children's future academic life. In particular, children's experiences in the early years shape their future academic attitudes (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Fan 2001; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2003; Coleman & McNeese 2009; Galindo & Sheldon 2012; Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gun 2013). The positive effects of ECE on future academic achievements have been recorded in the Finnish

context (Karhula, Erola, & Kilpi-Jakonen 2016). In addition to this future impact, the significant adults surrounding children affect their present well-being, giving ECE great importance in the present. Investigating the factors affecting the success of ECE is crucial to improving it (Galindo & Sheldon 2012).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), children's behaviour is influenced by their interactions with the surrounding contexts and by the interactions between these contexts. Healthy relationships between these surroundings are as important as the relationship between the child and the surroundings (Bronfenbrenner 1994). Two important settings provide the contexts for young children's learning and affect their future socioemotional well-being and academic achievement: the home and the educational institution (Galindo & Sheldon 2012).

A healthy relationship between the home and the educational institution forms the core of parental involvement (PI). In the most general terms, PI is parents' involvement in their children's schooling (Grolnick & Slowiaczek 1994) or 'parent and teacher collaboration [in] children's learning' (Uludağ 2008, 809). However it is hard to fully describe PI in one succinct statement as the views of parents and educators might differ (Rapp & Duncan 2012). For instance, parents may believe that keeping their children safe and bringing them to school constitutes involvement in their education, whereas educators might consider only parents' active presence in the school premises to be PI (Anderson & Minke 2007).

Due to the different views on collaboration and the changes in educational views over time, the terminology used in the literature varies: 'parental involvement', 'parental participation', 'parental partnership' and 'parental engagement' (Karlsen Bæck 2010a, 2010b; Alasuutari 2010; Share & Kerri 2013; Cottle & Alexander 2014). Although often used interchangeably, these terms are not synonymous. For example,

Evangelou et al. (2008) describe *parental involvement* as reactive and *parental engagement* as proactive. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argue that *engagement* has a deeper, more personal meaning than *involvement*. Although a long-time advocate of *parental involvement*, Epstein (2015) has switched to *parental partnership* to emphasise the equal roles of school and family. In this research, the term *parental involvement* is preferred and it is defined as multi-faceted collaboration between parents and educational institutions in various activities.

Several models of PI have been proposed. Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack (2007) roughly divide PI into home- and school-based involvement. In contrast, Epstein (2015, 32) presents an in-depth classification of PI in the ‘overlapping spheres of influence’ model which includes six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the family (Epstein & Dauber 1991). The present study is based on Epstein’s model as it is comprehensive and reflects the role of educators (Tekin 2011). Four types of PI (communication, learning at home, volunteering, and decision making) from Epstein’s model are investigated as present study focuses on educational activities and the educators’ role in the process through educational institutions.

The underlying presumption of PI is that parents and educators have equal roles in children’s early learning (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2001). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) conceptualise this idea of equal roles as a continuum which starts with PI and moves to parental engagement as the parent-school relationship strengthens. This research focuses on the first phase of this continuum and investigates the views and the practices of early childhood educators. This approach enables investigating early childhood educators’ perceptions of the

current state of PI in day-care centres, which, according to Karila (2005), is needed as the views of educators shape the practices.

According to OECD (2001), involving parents in education provides access to parents' wide knowledge of their children and promotes their positive views of children's learning. PI is especially crucial for ECE as young children need more care than older children (Morrow & Malin 2004). In addition to children's development, educational institutions and parents also benefit from effective PI (Hill & Taylor 2004; Çakmak 2010). Home-school collaboration allows both parents and teachers to learn from each other, thus parents can be supported as educational programmes are improved.

Despite the well-recognised benefits of PI, differences still exist between what the research recommends and what educational institutions actually implement (Hornby & Lafaele 2011). In reality, educational institutions and families fail to collaborate, and the gap between rhetoric and practice leads to insufficient PI (Henderson & Berla 1994; Christenson & Sheridan 2001). This research is aimed at unravelling the reasons for this insufficiency as well as the general views of educators on PI.

### ***Finnish context***

According to the legislation, Finnish ECE focuses on care, education and children's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development and emphasises co-operation with families (Niikko & Ugaste 2012). In Finland, ECE is provided to children younger than the compulsory school age (7). After parental leave, all children younger than school age are entitled to places in either day-care centres or family day care. One year before starting compulsory school, children attend one year of preschool education.

According to Finnish legislation (Early childhood education act, 19.1.1973/36, 8.5.2015/580), the purpose of ECE is to promote children's development and well-

being. The legislation also emphasises the importance of educators working together with parents to support them in bringing up their children but according to Hirsto (2010) it does not specify how to implement this partnership.

In the past decade, Finnish day care has undergone significant changes, including a change in the governing ministry, the number of children in groups and the required competences for staff. The legislation is regulating only the basics. Since the 1990s, decentralisation and legislative changes have shifted power to municipalities. Day-care group sizes have grown as the number of employees and the ratio of qualified day-care teachers have decreased (Pihlaja & Junttila 2001; Pihlaja, Rantanen, & Sonne 2010). Due to the public budget cuts, Finnish ECE has suffered in several respects.

Much research in the Finnish context has addressed early childhood educators' views and practices of PI and the obstacles to those practices (Hirsto 2010; Niiko & Ugaste 2012; Ugaste & Niiko 2015). However, no in-depth research on insufficient PI practices and their causes has been conducted. Hirsto (2010) states that communication is the PI type most frequently used by Finnish early childhood educators, while volunteering and decision making are the least. Finnish early childhood educators stress the importance of parental collaboration (Niikko & Ugaste 2012) but also the difficulties in building it (Ugaste & Niiko 2015).

A comparative study showed that teachers in Finland consider parents to be more passive than teachers in other countries (Hujala et al. 2009). The present study aims to deepen understanding of these views and to uncover Finnish educators' opinions about the sufficiency of PI practices and the reasons for insufficient practices in order to draw a more detailed picture of PI in Finnish ECE today.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data were collected through a survey administered to early childhood educators working in Helsinki, Finland, in two waves over approximately 5 months in 2015. The institutions surveyed employed approximately 1,200 educators, and the final sample responses from 287 educators. An accurate response rate could not be calculated as how many educators actually received the questionnaire was unknown. Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic information.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants' background variables

Variable	Number	Percent
Gender		
Female	280	97.6
Male	7	2.4
Experience in the field		
0-5 years	92	32.3
6-10 years	33	11.2
11-20 years	57	20.0
21-40 year	104	36.5
Educational background		
Kindergarten teacher	203	70.7
Social pedagogue*	77	26.8
Other	7	2.4
Education level		
University of applied sciences	75	26.1
University	132	46.0
Old kindergarten teacher seminars	67	23.3
Master's degree	10	3.5
Age group of the children		
0-3	68	23.7
3-5/6	147	51.2
6-7	58	20.2
Mixed age	14	4.9

\* Social pedagogy is a bachelor's degree of social services gained from universities of applied sciences in Finland.

### *Instrument*

The study instrument was a questionnaire designed to measure general views on PI and attitudes towards types of PI based on Epstein's (2015) model. Webropol was used as the online data collection tool. The questionnaire and a brief explanation of the research were sent to the Helsinki ECE manager, seeking permission to conduct the research. The questionnaire included an informed consent form, and the responses were

anonymous. After permission was granted, ECE manager sent a link to the questionnaire to the ECE expert in Helsinki, who forwarded it to all the ECE institutions in Helsinki (approximately 300 at the time) with the request that the principals distribute the link to educators.

The quantitative data and the qualitative material were collected simultaneously with the same instrument. The questionnaire consisted of five parts. The first part, *general view* (9 items), explored the respondents' general attitudes towards PI and used a Likert scale (1 = 'totally disagree' to 5 = 'totally agree'). The other four parts focused on the PI types and the reasons for insufficient practices, if any. The second part, *communication* (7 items), measured the frequency of PI through communication; the third part, *volunteering* (5 items), the frequency of PI through volunteering; the fourth part, *learning at home* (6 items), the frequency of encouragement of parents to support educational activities at home; and the fifth part, *decision making* (5 items), the frequency of PI in the decision-making process. These four parts used a Likert scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*) in all but four multiple-choice questions in total.

A reliability test was run for all items in the questionnaire which found that they were all reliable (30 items;  $\alpha = .79$ ). The test was repeated separately for each section, producing Cronbach's alpha for each section: general view: .6, communication: .45, volunteering: .77, learning at home: .66 and decision making: .62. Some items in the general views section were excluded from the analysis due to low Cronbach's alpha values. The communication section had a low Cronbach's alpha, so its items were examined separately.

The last four parts also contained one multiple-choice item with an open-ended option. These items targeted the reasons underlying insufficient PI practices. The participants were asked to select any option only if they believed that existing practices

were insufficient and were allowed to choose more than one option. The open-ended option allowing the participants to explain the reasons for insufficient practices in their own words enabled obtaining new, in-depth knowledge of PI (e.g. Lund 2012). The open-ended answers generated the qualitative material, providing insights into different aspects of PI practices, and supplemented the quantitative data (e.g. Erzberger and Kelle 2003, 473).

### *Analysis*

A mixed-method design was used in this study, which is presented as a valid method to mitigate the limitations of single-method studies and to confirm the study (Greene & Caracelli 1997; Creswell et al. 2008). Mixed-method analysis allows a combination of measurements and interpretations through data-adequate ways (Biesta 2010, 101). The qualitative material was analysed to gain more detailed information on the reasons for insufficient PI practices. Regarding the open-ended options, the respondents made 84 statements in the communication section, 76 statements in the volunteering section, 41 statements in the learning at home section and 43 statements in the decision making section. These statements provided new information about the participants' reasons for insufficient practices beyond the options listed in the questionnaire.

In the first step of the quantitative analysis, factor analysis was performed for each section, clustering the items into factors to assess whether they measured the desired factors. Next, frequency tests with multiple-choice items were conducted to identify the underlying reasons for insufficient practices of particular PI types. In addition, the frequency tests were repeated for the items in the communication section. Cross-tabulation analysis was performed to reveal the associations between the background variables and the insufficiency statements.



In the qualitative analysis, content analysis was performed by adapting grounded theory, where the analysis is based on the material (Strauss & Corbin 1996). This analysis added depth to the quantitative research results. All the sections of the questionnaire were included in this analysis.

The qualitative material was drawn from the open-ended answers to the questionnaire items investigating insufficient PI practices. All the responses to the open-ended option were analysed using coding procedures. The level of investigator triangulation was good (>90%). In open coding, the material was labelled for the reasons for problems given by the participants (e.g., time, skills, resources, cultural differences, interest, trust, stress, administration and motivation). The labels generated (N = 18) were grouped by similarities to create categories for axial coding. Five high-order categories were extracted from the axial coding. After creation of the categories, the distribution of the reasons by PI type was assessed (e.g. Strauss & Corbin 1996; Böhm 2004).

## **Results**

### ***General views on PI and attitudes towards PI types***

As the first step to understand how Finnish early childhood educators perceive PI, educators' general views (9 items) on this matter were investigated. The mean scores (M = 3.65, Table 2) show that Finnish early childhood educators view PI positively. The participants were also asked about their opinions on who has the responsibility to establish the home–institution relationship. The responses show that Finnish early childhood educators believe that this responsibility lies primarily with educators (M<sub>3rd item</sub> = 3.56, M<sub>4th item</sub> = 2.95, M<sub>5th item</sub> = 2.83).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of general views of Finnish early childhood educators

	N	Percentages	Mean	Std. Deviation
General view	282	53.7	3.65	.56
<i>Building a relationship between educational institution and parents is teachers' duty.</i>	286	56.1	3.56	1.09
<i>Building a relationship between educational institution and parents is principals' duty.</i>	286	31.7	2.95	1.10
<i>Building a relationship between educational institution and parents is parents' duty.</i>	284	25.8	2.83	1.04
Valid N (list wise)	282			

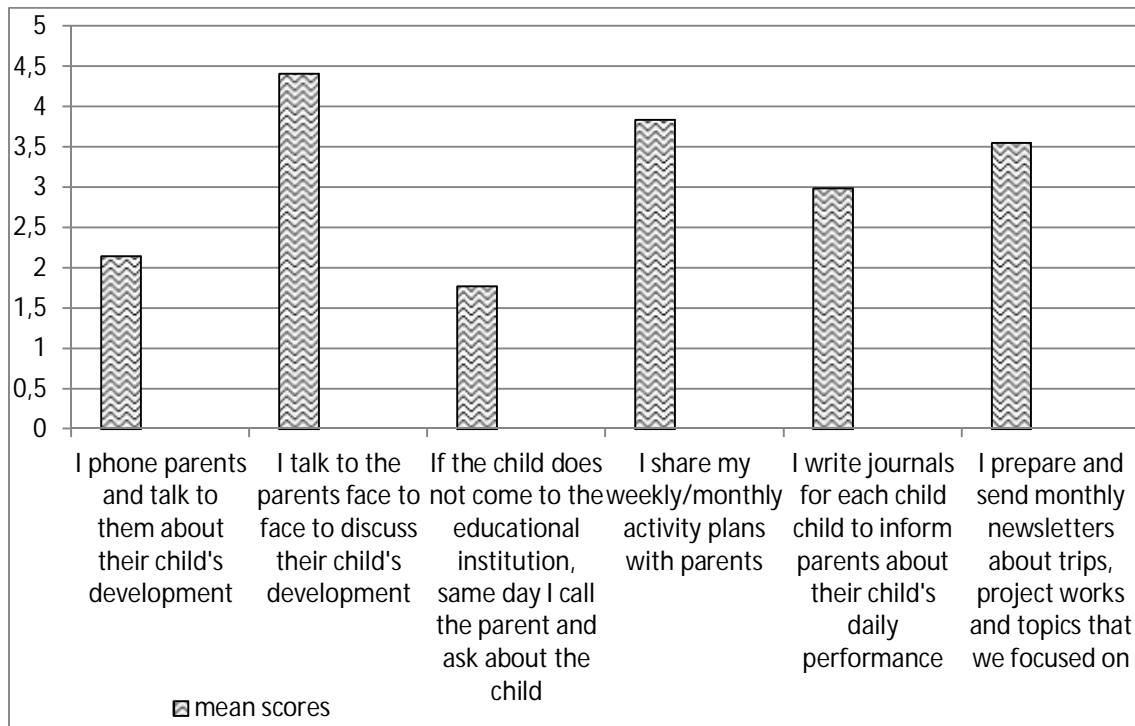
Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the popularity of the PI types. The most common type is to involve parents in *learning at home* (M = 3.43), while the least popular is to involve parents as volunteers (M = 2.39).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of PI types

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Volunteering	280	1.00	5.00	2.39	.66628
Learning at home	276	1.00	5.00	3.43	.57961
Decision making	284	1.00	5.00	2.57	.61551
Valid N (list wise)	269				

The item-based analysis for the communication section shows that the most common means of communication in PI is face-to-face conversations. Additionally, written communication is used more frequently than telephone communication (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Means of items in communication section



***Reasons for insufficient practices by PI type***

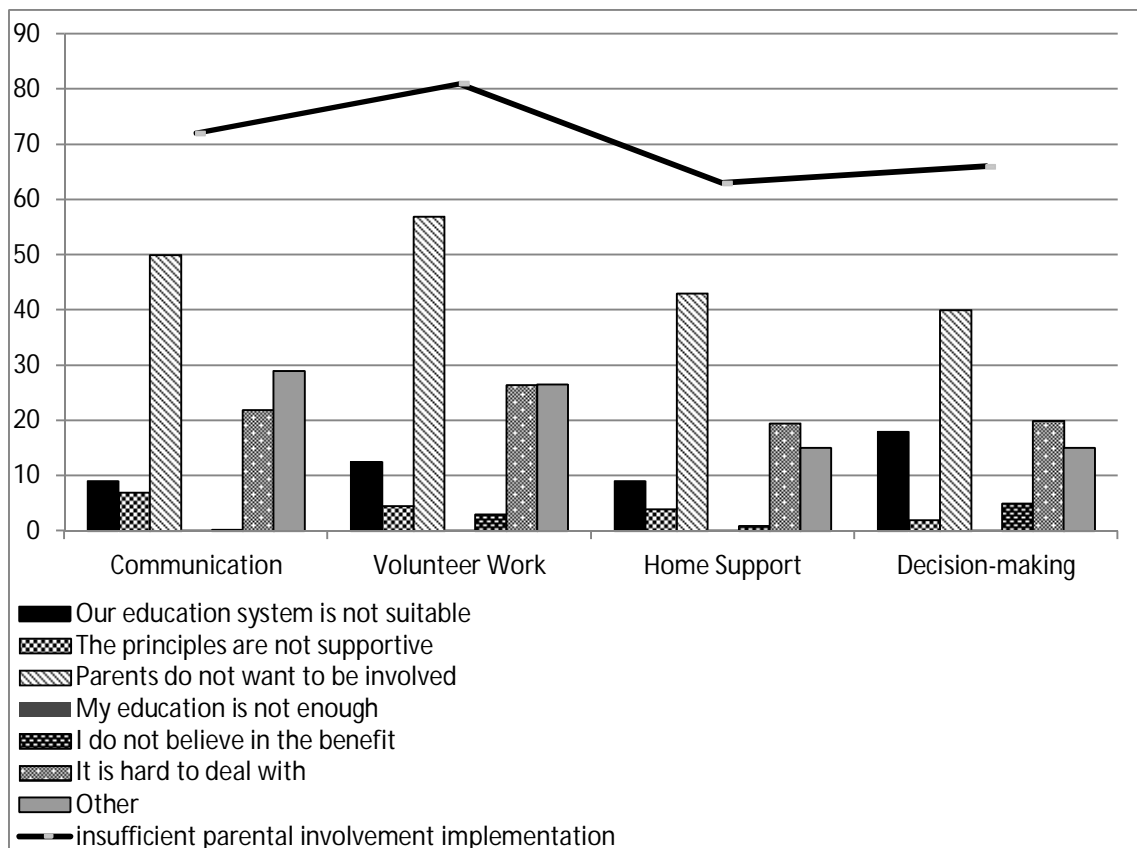
Each section targeting a particular PI type included a question with an open-ended option to allow the participants to explain why they might think the practices for that PI type are insufficient. In this design, unfilled multiple-choice questions were considered to indicate that the practices for the particular PI type were sufficient (the participants were instructed to skip the question if they thought that the particular PI type was adequately practiced).

In the responses, 72% of the participants (Fig. 2) think that communication is not practiced sufficiently as a PI type. Involving parents as volunteers is regarded as more problematic, with 81% of participants reporting insufficient practice. Although the most common PI type, learning at home is also practiced insufficiently (63% of the participants). As well, 66% of the participants claim that PI in decision making is not practiced sufficiently.

The associations between the background variables and the perceptions of insufficient PI practices were checked through a series of cross-tabulation tests. After repeating the test for each background variable and each PI type, the results reveal a significant association between the participants' age and the frequency of perceived insufficient use of communication as a PI type ( $p = 0.015$ ). Another correlation is found between the age groups of the children and perceived insufficiency in PI through volunteering ( $p = 0.047$ ). However, no other associations were found.

To identify the reasons for the difficulties in practicing specific PI types, frequency tests were run separately. The most common reason cited for insufficient practices across all PI types is that 'parents do not want to be involved'. The least common reason is that 'my education is not enough to practice this PI type' (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The percentages of reasons for insufficient practice of specific PI types\* and the participants who states that the PI practices are insufficient.



\* Per cent of participants who stated that they cannot use the specific PI type sufficiently. Participants could mark more than one reason.

***In-depth analysis of insufficient PI***

The open-ended answers provide a deeper understanding of the reasons for insufficient PI. The most-oft chosen reason among the multiple-choices is that ‘parents do not want to be involved’, and the responses to the open-ended options open a new dimension to this statement (Table 4). The cultural views on PI in ECE are quite homogenous. Most reasons are related to parents or the conditions of day-care centres, rarely to the teachers themselves or to their practices. The main categories for insufficient practices are time management, individual incompatibility, management and administration, unclear purpose of ECE and lack of trust and competence.

Table 4. Number of mentions of other reasons of insufficient practice of PI types.

	Communication	Volunteer works	Learning at home	Decision making
Time management	48	<b>50</b>	24	8
Personal differences	<b>18</b>	7	5	5
Interest	<b>10</b>	6	3	1
Resources	<b>9</b>	3	3	2
Regulation	1	1	1	<b>12</b>
Unclear task of ECE	<b>8</b>	2	3	2
Need	2	4	<b>7</b>	1
Trust	0	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	0
Attitude	<b>5</b>	0	2	1
Competence	3	<b>4</b>	0	2

Time management is the most frequently reported reason for insufficient practice of PI (130 times) in the open-ended responses. This category includes all time-related references, such as after-work activities, parental duties due to family size and the workload and the everyday busyness of both parents and teachers. The statements

mostly point to parents' lack of time, followed by more general statements related to educators' time management issues and workload.

In statements regarding insufficient communication practices as PI, the teachers primarily discuss their daily workload and lack of time to find feasible means of communication for PI. For example, a respondent states: 'time is limited. My main task is to interact with the children. I do not have much time for parents'. In the answers addressing learning at home and involving parents as volunteers, though, the focus is more often on the parents' lack of time. For example, regarding learning at home, the participants mention the parents' lack of time and busy everyday life. Similarly, regarding volunteering, a respondent explains that 'parents work during the hours when the children are in day care, which is why they cannot participate in activities'. Another teacher supports this position, stating that 'the parents cannot come in the daytime, and we are not allowed to work outside working hours'.

Individual incompatibility (55 times) encompasses differences in language, culture and viewpoints. This reason is mentioned in connection to every PI type and is the most commonly given reason for not using communication in PI. Language barriers are mentioned most frequently. One participant states: 'with some parents, there is no fluent common language, and cooperation is very difficult for that reason'. Another writes, without mentioning any parties involved, 'the language barrier, cultural differences'. According to the participants, the parents and the professionals have different individual interests, and both may also lack interest, motivation and willingness. The statements regarding individual incompatibility are almost exclusively associated with the parents and are related to all PI types, although most concern communication and volunteering. Illustrating this point, one participant states that 'some parents are not interested', and another participant somewhat accusatorily

describes ‘a lack of motivation on the parents’ part to participate in open cooperation’. The participants also mention ‘attitude’ (8 times), most often referring negative or passive parental attitudes towards PI: ‘the lack of appreciation for preschool education becomes obvious in the parents’ attitude.’

Management and administrative obstacles (32 times) are also among the reasons for insufficient practices. The participants explain that the lack of resources in ECE increases the pressure and workload; there are too many children in groups, an inadequate number of staff and facilities or both. A teacher notes that ‘resources have been pressed to the limit’. Regulations also limit PI, especially when incorporating parents in decision making: ‘all [the] important decisions have already been made somewhere else!’ Another teacher asks: ‘why ask about a matter which they cannot (neither can we) have any influence on?!’

The respondents’ understanding of ECE and collaboration with parents is worth mentioning. The unclear purpose of ECE (15 times) and the need for involvement (14 times) are reasons for insufficient practices of many PI types. Again, these two reasons are attributed to both parents and educators and mentioned for every PI type. Regarding the purpose of ECE and parents’ role in it, one participant explains: ‘parents do not always understand or realise the significance of pre-primary education. The children are “shuffled away”, so parents have time and possibility to do their own business’. Supporting this statement, another respondent writes: ‘some of parents think that it [children’s education is a matter] belonging to the day-care and not to them. They pay for the service’. Another contradicts the importance of PI: ‘why should parents participate in the first place? Parents work, which is why it is difficult to demand that they participate’. Similarly, another participant states: ‘the staff does not want to bother the parents’. These quotations illustrate that PI is seen as a burden on parents,

conflicting with the perceived need for PI. For instance, one participant states that '(parents) do not regard their own participation', whereas another argues against the need: 'I ask: why should they?'

A lack of trust and competence in the fields of education or child-rearing is also mentioned (18 times) as a reason for insufficient PI. Trust goes two ways: trust in oneself and trust in others. Based on the responses, the parents' trust in the educators' knowledge and management skills leads to insufficient PI. Participants also mention that the parents do not trust in themselves enough to facilitate their children' learning at home. Regarding parental support at home and PI through volunteering, a respondent states that 'parents trust in our professional competence and do not value their own participation'. Another teacher speculates that 'the parents do not necessarily trust themselves as implementers of pre-primary school activities'.

Lack of competence can be divided into lack of emotional competence (2 times) and lack of intellectual competence (7 times). The participants describe their own lack of experience and skill and the parents' lack of knowledge. For example, one participant describes her knowledge of professional culture and experience in pre-primary education as inadequate, while another believes that the parents' lack of competence and uncertainty differs from the 'correct way' to participate.

The teachers see the reasons for insufficient practices as external to themselves and mostly attribute failing practices to parents or management and administrative factors. The teachers do not reflect on their own practices. Differences between institutions might exist, as one respondent marvels: 'I cannot say why parents are not asked to participate in this day-care centre where I now work. In previous centres, the parents were always welcome'.



## **Discussion**

The study findings show that Finnish early childhood educators have positive attitudes towards PI and agree on its importance. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that these positive attitudes are quite superficial. This tendency aligns with the findings of Hujala et al. (2009) that Finnish early childhood educators want to restrict education to institutions and regard parents as passive. The item-based analysis shows that the respondents believe that although parents, educators and principals together establish collaboration between the educational institution and the home, educators bear slightly greater responsibility in this area. These findings differ from those reported in research conducted in the United States, where kindergarten teachers are not convinced of their obligation to carry out PI (Swick & McKnight 1989).

Finnish early childhood educators agree that learning at home best meets their needs as this appears to be the most popular PI type. Previous research by Hindman et al. (2012) and Hakyemez (2015) found similar results indicating that the most common type of PI is, indeed, learning at home. This observation is also supported by Sabanci (2009), who reported that teachers favour learning at home while principals view communication, volunteering and decision making more positively than teachers. This difference might result from educators' busy schedules as parental support of student learning at home reduces educators' professional burden. In contrast, involving parents as volunteers is not common as parents also usually have a busy work-life. Furthermore, considering that educators themselves do not have much power in decision-making processes, PI in decision making is understandably difficult.

Finnish early childhood educators prefer face-to-face and written communication over telephone communication. Hirsto (2010) also reported that Finnish early childhood educators frequently use face-to-face and written communication to

inform and involve parents. These face-to-face conversations often take place in unofficial encounters during pick-up and drop-off (Venninen & Purola 2013), especially to address problems (Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen 2011).

The most important contribution of this research is to clarify the reasons for insufficient PI practices. Most commonly, the participants stated that they do not believe that the parents want to be involved (Fig 2). This result corresponds with the Greek case, where teachers consider the parental participation rate to be insufficient (Koutrouba et al. 2009). The least frequent reason given by the participants is that they do not view their own education as adequate to practice a particular PI type. These results indicate high professional self-esteem among early childhood educators.

Räty, Kasanen and Laine (2009) explain that Finnish parents see child-rearing as their duty and teaching as the responsibility of educational institutions. This belief might explain why early childhood educators think that parents are unwilling to be involved. In the second and third most commonly given reasons, some educators find it difficult to conduct PI and believe that the Finnish ECE system does not provide sufficient opportunities to do so. Thus, despite high professional self-esteem, Finnish early childhood educators might benefit from further support in involving parents, and changes in attitudes towards PI also merit discussion.

Another notable finding is the unclear purpose of ECE in Finland, which reflects an underlying dilemma in ECE services. Finnish society established day care as a social service to facilitate employment (Välimäki 1998), not as an educational context for children (Hujala et al. 2009). This understanding can be seen in the participants' answers describing ECE institutions as a place for children only while their parents work (Onnismaa 2001). This misconception can also be seen in other European Union countries. For instance, Greek families regard ECE professionals as mere babysitters,

dismissing ECE as the beginning of formal education (Rentzou 2011). Onnismaa (2001) found that day care emphasises the privacy of the home and the privacy of the day care as two unrelated contexts in children's lives. This privacy concern explains why early childhood educators believe that PI activities bother parents.

Although learning at home is the most common PI type in this study, 63% of the Finnish early childhood educators admit that they do not exploit it sufficiently (Fig. 2). A lack of time and heavy work load are the primary barriers, as in other EU countries (Koutrouba et al. 2009). In recent years, educators' workload has increased as resources have decreased (Rintakorpi 2015; Karila 2016). Work-life places also heavy demands on parents, so they may see any day-care activities with their children as extra burdens.

In addition to long working hours, cultural and language differences exert a negative influence. Parents who lack cultural and language competences prefer not to be involved in education-related subjects. Families' demographic characteristics also play an important role in the quality of PI (Baker & Stevenson 1986). Parents with poor educational backgrounds and low incomes tend to avoid school-related activities, while well-educated parents with high educational and socioeconomic levels support their children's education through involvement (Hilado, Kallemeyn, & Phillips 2013). Mahmood (2013), however, reported that early childhood educators state that upper-middle class parents tend to focus more on their careers and to dedicate less time to their children's education.

In the present findings, volunteering is the most-problematic and least-used PI type (Fig. 2). Finnish traditions may constitute one reason. Day-care services were originally established in the 1970s to support the national economy and to encourage women to enter the labour market. Day care enabled both parents to have full-time employment (Välimäki 1998). At the same time, volunteering is considered to be the

most time-consuming PI type, but its popularity is also challenged by language and cultural differences, as well as time-management issues. These obstacles might stem from teachers' inability to cope with cultural differences and the difficulties families of foreign origin encounter while adapting to the Finnish system. Cultural differences are recognised as an obstacle to involvement in many countries. Mahmood (2013) reported that first-year educators often find that their college education does not sufficiently prepare them to cope with cultural differences. Providing in-service education on multiculturalism and resolving the obstacles caused by cultural differences could help educators involve parents from different ethnic and cultural background.

Regarding communication as a PI type, 72% of the participants state that they cannot adequately use communication methods, pointing to an important disconnection between day care and home. According to the participants, the primary causes of inadequate communication are cultural differences and the lack of time and a common language. This disconnection urgently needs to be addressed.

Two-thirds of the participants do not think that they sufficiently involve parents in decision making, while two-fifths believe that parents do not want to be involved. The qualitative material from this study identifies municipal regulations as one cause of insufficient PI in decision making. Although the law does not forbid parental participation in decision making, it does not allow much room for parents to speak up (Rabusicová & Emmerová 2002). According to the participants in this study, the regulations do not leave room for educators to involve parents in decision making. Nevertheless, educational institutions are well able to maintain effective parental-involvement programmes as long as administrators acknowledge the importance of well-structured institution-home collaboration and allow teachers autonomy to work with parents in decision making (Berger 2008). However, educators do not unanimously

embrace involving parents in the decision-making process. Many early childhood educators believe that these tasks should be done by professionals with specific pedagogical skills and education in the field (Venninen & Purola 2013).

The survey respondents also state that parents trust professionals and do not feel the need to be involved. This finding supports findings previous research on PI in Finland, in which parents indicate satisfaction, trust and commitment to their children's day care, although 80% of the parents state that they are committed to being involved, but only 40% are actually willing to participate in children's group activities (Pihlaja, Kinos, & Mäntymäki 2010).

### **Limitations and further research**

It was not possible to establish the response rate to the survey used in this study as regulations required the involvement of many third parties in data collection. Nevertheless, the number of participants is substantial, supporting the validity of the results. This study focuses on educators' views and attitudes towards PI and its types. Further research could address parental views and attitudes. A bridge between these parties could provide a better understanding of how to improve PI in ECE.

The findings also identify issues at the administrative and the legislative levels. The participants frequently point to restrictive regulations and a lack of administrative support as reasons for insufficient PI. Examining the application of new Finnish ECE legislation to these institutions, therefore, could yield valuable insights into the current and the future state of these institutions and their collaboration with parents.

Finally, cultural differences, an oft-cited reason for insufficient PI in ECE, provide a platform to analyse migrant families and their position in the Finnish educational system. With increasing mobility and multiculturalism, the integration of individuals into society has gained increasing importance.

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