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## A Brief Introduction to Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education in Turkish and Finnish Contexts

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### Abstract

Research conducted in recent decades has shown the importance of parental involvement in pupils' well-being, learning, and future academic success as well as their cognitive, social, and emotional development. In addition to these benefits, parental involvement practices improve parental confidence and satisfaction as well as enriching educational programmes, enhancing the climate of educational institutions, and easing teachers' work burden through responsibility-sharing and increased information flow. Although the significant role of parental involvement is well-supported by various studies, some research reveals that a gap continues to exist between the recommendations of related research and what is practised in educational institutions in reality. This gap explains in part the persistence of insufficient parental involvement practices. This paper, which is based on my public lektio aims to gain a better understanding of early childhood educators' self-reported reasons for insufficient practices as well as identifying their parental involvement practices and their views in Finnish and Turkish contexts. The study is reported in four original articles, using the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from a representative sample of 287 early childhood educators from Helsinki and 225 early childhood educators from Ankara. Analysis of the results drew attention to the gap between theory and practice as well as the reasons behind this gap from the educators' point of view. All the data material were discussed for each context, thus allowing for the highlighting of practical implications, which contributed not only to the research on parental involvement practices in different countries but also to the research on identifying factors affecting sufficient parental involvement. In addition to country-centred interpretations, the comparative aspect of this study contributes to existing research into world culture vs. local culture discussions.

**Keywords:** parental involvement; early childhood education; teacher views; affecting factors; parental-involvement types

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## Introduction

This summary is based on the public defence lektio of my doctoral dissertation (Hakyemez-Paul, 2019), which draws a general picture of parental involvement practices and affecting factors in Finland and Turkey, based on early childhood educators' self-reported answers to a survey prepared for this study. A point of departure for this study stems from previous research emphasising how parental involvement in early childhood education (ECE) plays an important role in children's, families' and educators' wellbeing and success (Bakken et al., 2017; Sommer et al., 2013). Based on its well-established benefits, gaining a better understanding of early childhood educators' self-reported reasons for insufficient parental involvement as well as identifying their parental involvement practices<sup>2</sup> and their views thereof are key to improving parental involvement as one of the significant factors affecting the quality of ECEC (Jeynes, 2012).

## Theoretical framework

For this study, parental involvement is defined as multi-faceted collaboration between parents and educational institutions via various activities designed to support children's healthy development. The focus of this study is directed towards the educator's initiatives for establishing such collaboration. The multidimensional nature of parental involvement is explored within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems of human development theory, Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model, and Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence (OSoI) model (Epstein et al., 2002).

In the ecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), the importance of the interactions between the child and her or his surrounding elements are discussed, such as family, educational institution, neighbours and different social settings. The significance of interactions between these surrounding settings at the mesosystem level is also stressed, which points to the need for structured home-school interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The model by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) explains the evolving nature of such an interaction. In this model, the home-school collaboration is a continuum that begins with involving parents in education through opportunities provided by the school and the educators. As the relationship grows stronger, parents become engaged in their children's learning. In terms of PI practices, Epstein's conceptual model of parental involvement suggests six types of parental involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2002).

In this study, to narrow down the focus; interactions between the educational institutions and home were chosen, to leave out the other influencing factors, thereby allowing the discovery of the basic state of PI in ECE institutions. Besides this narrowed focus on

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<sup>2</sup> Parental involvement is a concept with variety of practices available depending on the understanding of this concept. This is discussed at length in the original study.

the interacting elements of the mesosystem, the types of PI have also been narrowed down and four types of PI (communication, learning at home, volunteering and decision making) have been chosen from Epstein's OSOI model. This selection of PI types enables this study to focus solely on the educators' side of the PI process through educational activities that are established based on their initiatives. This conceptual framework enables the investigation of early childhood educators' perceptions of the current state of PI and the barriers they face in terms of PI in day-care centres; such an investigation, according to Karila (2005), is needed as the views of educators shape practices. Hence the study aims to deepen the understanding of current PI practices, early childhood educators' views on PI and their self-reported reasons for insufficient PI practices from the educator's point of view in two contexts; Turkey and Finland. To accomplish these aims, this study takes an explanatory stance by adopting a variety of educational research techniques, such as descriptive, correlational and survey studies (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

### **Selection of the contexts**

The starting point for the selection of the contexts was to determine the most suitable countries, incorporating some historical similarities with societal and policy level differences. One way to find feasibly comparable countries is to look into international organisations, which collect viable data from the member countries (Hantrais, 2009). OECD was chosen since it provides detailed information on educational systems and practices of its member countries. Additionally, the researcher's position, which includes both physical and cultural familiarity (Philips & Schweisfurth, 2008) with Turkey and Finland, led to these countries constituting suitable contexts of the study. Furthermore, the countries are interesting for comparative research as they were founded around the same time, with similar familial and educational values; yet they differed on education administration such as ECEC governance, budget, as well as a transformation in familial constructs.

### **Dissertation aims and Methods**

This study aimed to investigate the general views of early childhood educators regarding parental involvement and their attitudes towards different types of parental involvement, as well as to find out why specific types of parental involvement are not used to a sufficient extent in their opinion. As Finland and Turkey have adopted different governance strategies for ECE, which solicited further investigation. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are early childhood educators' views on parental involvement?
2. What types of parental involvement are used and what are the reasons for insufficient implementations?

3. How are early childhood educators' views on parental involvement associated with their experience in the field, education level, educational background, and the age group of pupils they are working with?
4. How do parental involvement practices relate to early childhood educators' experience in the field, education level, educational background, and the age group of pupils they are working with?
5. What are the differences and similarities between Finnish and Turkish contexts?

### **Structure of the dissertation**

The study consists of two parts corresponding to the Turkish and Finnish context respectively. To answer the proposed research questions, the dissertation included four empirical articles. In the first article (Hakyemez, 2015), early childhood educators' views on parental involvement and their parental involvement practices, as well as their self-reported reasons for insufficient parental involvement practices in the Turkish context. 113 early childhood educators who were employed at various ECE institutions in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, participated in this research in 2012, which was the first set of data collected from Turkey for this study. In the second article (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018a), early childhood educators' views on parental involvement and their parental involvement practices were investigated in the Finnish context, whereas in the third article (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018b) the focus was Finnish early childhood educators' self-reported reasons for insufficient parental involvement practices in their institution. For the second and third articles, the same data were used, which were gathered from early childhood educators working in Helsinki, the capital of Finland in 2015, including 287 participants (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018a; 2018b). Finally, the fourth article (Hakyemez-Paul et al., under review), which adopted a comparative approach across the two countries, make use of the data collected in Finland in 2015 and a new dataset from Turkey.

### **Main findings and Discussion**

According to the country based results, both Finnish and Turkish early childhood educators acknowledge the significance of parental involvement. Considering that the importance of parental involvement is recognised internationally (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012), having the same views on parental involvement is not a surprising result. However, further analyses showed some differences. For example, when positive and negative items are analysed separately, data reveals that Finnish early childhood educators hold more negative views on parental involvement than Turkish counterparts. Using theoretical lenses of professionalism (Karila, 2010) combined with horizontal versus vertical perspectives on home-school relationships (Alasuutari, 2010), it seemed as if the vertical frame of professionalism assumed by Finnish educators becomes prominent and creating a barrier for parental involvement. The results reveal that while Turkish early childhood

educators regard parental involvement as teamwork with shared responsibility among educators, administrators and parents; Finnish early childhood educators believe that they have a slightly superior responsibility in this teamwork. This might be a result of the fact that Finnish early childhood educators are the sole responsible for establishing one of the main parental involvement activities in Finnish curriculum; the personal plan for the child. Implementation of the personal plan is the teachers' responsibility but this does not mean that they prepare and implement it alone. Parents and educators work together for personal plans.

When tested what may affect the views on parental involvement, Turkish and Finnish data had different results based on the participants' background. In the Turkish context, there was no correlation between participants' general views on parental involvement and their experience in the field. However, in the Finnish context, the more experienced the early childhood educator is, the more positive their views on parental involvement are. The results from the Finnish context also reveal that old kindergarten seminary graduates are more positive about parental involvement, but it needs to be kept in mind that they are also the ones with the most experience.

Another difference between the Turkish and Finnish context is that Turkish educators use every given parental involvement type more frequently than their Finnish counterparts (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen, 2018a). Nonetheless, for both contexts, educators mostly prefer parental involvement in learning-at-home activities (Hakyemez, 2015; Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen, 2018a). The reason might be the availability of parents, meaning; although some parents would not be interested or able to join activities in educational institutions, most of them are involved with their children's learning at home (Epstein, 1987).

Turkish and Finnish educators part from each other when it comes to the least preferred PI types. While Turkish educators favour involving parents in decision-making processes the least, Finnish educators use volunteering the least, closely followed by involving parents in decision-making processes. Although the reason for this might be the vertical frame of professionalism (Venninen & Purola, 2013), educators' extent of power in decision-making also must be kept in mind, since the results of this study also reveal that they might not have great control over such decisions in the first place.

Other than searching for the views on parental involvement and preferred parental involvement types, this study also addresses possible insufficiencies in involving parents and the reasons behind them. According to the results, on the contrary to stated positive views on parental involvement and use of parental involvement types, a staggering amount of participants from both countries believe that parental involvement is not sufficient in their institutions (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). When conducting a comparative analysis of the Turkish and Finnish data material, data reveals that Finnish early childhood educators mention this insufficiency more often than their Turkish counterparts. This might seem normal considering that Turkish early childhood

educators use any given parental involvement type significantly more frequently. However, it might as well be a sign of a tendency of self-criticism and/or higher self-expectations of Finnish early childhood educators.

According to early childhood educators self-reported answers, the reasons behind this insufficiency appear to be the same for both countries, which is parents' unwillingness to involve in their child's ECEC. This conception might be rooted in the possibility of educators and parents conceptualising parental involvement in different ways (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). As a result; although the educators see parents unmotivated for involvement, parents might not be aware of what is expected from them in terms of their involvement.

In addition to the differences in understanding of what constitutes parental involvement, several other factors are affecting parental involvement negatively. One and maybe the foremost of these reasons is the fast-changing work life, which becomes more straining mentally along with extended work hours (Koutrouba et al., 2009). The results of this study not only further support the claim of parents' work situation as an affecting factor, as also Epstein (2016) states; it also reveals that educators' workload affects parental involvement practices negatively as well. In addition to their workload, educators also mentioned the lack of resources and lack of time due to the crowded groups. The recent changes in Finnish education funding might be the reason for this struggle, which increased day-care group sizes as well as decreasing the number of employees and the ratio of qualified kindergarten teachers (Pihlaja et al., 2010).

Besides the changing dynamics of working life; increasing multiculturalism and diverse cultural settings in education are also become prominent and might be challenging for education professionals (Gunn-Morris & Taylor, 1998). The results of this study expose culture and language differences as obstacles for parental involvement in the Finnish context. Although Turkish data did not shed light on this issue, there is also rising multiculturalism, particularly with more than four million refugees residing in Turkey and a large number of refugee children in early childhood education (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). This does not only refer to differences in language but also in culture and different needs in mental and educational aspects because due to trauma and high stress (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

Finally, the conceptualisation of ECEC's purpose in society stands as an obstacle for parental involvement in the Finnish context, especially for involving parents as volunteers. Volunteering as a parental involvement type is one of the least practised in Finnish ECEC institutions. This might be because of the still on-going conception of ECEC as a social service to improve the national economy by increasing the number of women in the workforce, rather than an educational setting (Onnismaa, 2001; Hujala et al., 2009, Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018a). This misconception of whether ECEC is a necessity for the child or the job market is still evident not only in the Finnish context but also in other European countries such as in Greece (Rentzou, 2011). As a result, both parents and educators may fall into the thought that PI is unnecessary or unfair to expect since they think that ECEC institutions are just a place for children of working parents.

## Conclusion

The results of this study drew attention to educators' views, preferences and reasons for insufficiency on parental involvement in Finnish and Turkish contexts. As on a global scale, the importance of parental involvement in ECE is recognised in both Turkey (Hakyemez, 2015) and Finland (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018a; 2018b). Although there are differences in ECE governance strategies, the practises surrounding parental involvement are quite similar and this similarity expands to insufficient practices and reasons behind this insufficiency (Hakyemez-Paul et al., under review).

With the findings, the complex interrelationships between the nested systems from Bronfenbrenner's human development theory (1994) are observed, in which the home-school relationship is not limited to these two mesosystems but instead also shaped by both macro- and exosystems. Besides, with this research, the parental involvement types taken from Epstein's model (Epstein et al., 2002) were supported in the ECE field in both contexts. In addition to supporting the theory itself, this study also falls in line with the challenges Epstein (2016) proposes, which are listed separately for each type of parental involvement. This study discovered that those challenges often overlap among different types of parental involvement rather than being specific to one type. There is still a need for support in both Turkish and Finnish ECE to ensure the involvement of parents as well as educators' occupational wellbeing and satisfaction. This support is not only about providing educators with new guidelines for parental involvement but also educating the parents, the general public, as well as employers.

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