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Factors Affecting Early Childhood Educators' Views and Practices of Parental Involvement

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ABSTRACT: Past research has shown the significant role of parental involvement in children's academic achievements as well as their healthy development and well-being. For effective parental involvement, it is imperative to understand the views of early childhood educators and the factors affecting their parental involvement practices. The present study investigates Finnish early childhood educators' views on parental involvement and uncovers the relationship between their parental involvement practices and their education level and backgrounds, the age groups of pupils they work with and their experience in the field of early childhood education. A quantitative method was employed, and a representative sample of 287 educators from one of the biggest municipalities of Finland completed a questionnaire. Their views of parental involvement and the types of parental involvement they employ are certainly impacted by their experience in the field. Our findings show that while the educational level of the participants and the age groups they work with impact their views and practices of parental involvement, their educational background did not have any effect on this.

Keywords: parental involvement, educator practices, educator characteristics, early childhood education, parental involvement types, Finnish context

Introduction

As Bronfenbrenner (1994) states in his ecological systems theory, children's behaviour is influenced by their interactions with their surrounding contexts, such as the home and educational institutions, as well as the interactions between these contexts. A healthy

relationship between their surroundings is as important as the relationship between the child and his or her surroundings. Bronfenbrenner (1994) refers these entities as "microsystem" and the interactions between these microsystems as "mesosystem". These interactions are shaped by the culture of microsystems, and might jeopardise the development of a child when they clash (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As a result, well-established smooth relationships between these microsystems are needed.

A considerable number of researchers have presented compelling proof that the more the collaboration between parents and educational institutions, the better pupils perform in their education and the better they develop in various other domains (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Fan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Coleman & McNeese, 2009; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). Furthermore, past research suggests that involving the parents can be highly beneficial for the child's educational institution, educational programme as well as for the child and parent wellbeing (Çakmak, 2010; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Although the benefits of parental involvement have been emphasised in recent decades, there is still a gap between what the literature recommends and how parental involvement practices play out de facto (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Educational institutions and parents often fail to collaborate in practice, which leads to insufficient parental involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Therefore, one should pay significant attention to factors that may affect parental involvement practices.

Previous studies have identified several factors that impact the involvement of parents, such as the educational institution's environment, the parents' social and economic standing, and the educators' level of education Berger (2008) argues that the parents' past experiences, cultural values and feelings also play an important role in the home-educational institution relationship. Similarly, Taylor, Clayton and Rowley (2004) claim that past school experiences influence parents' attitudes towards getting involved in their children's learning—parents with positive memories tend to interact with their children's educational institution while parents with stressful memories avoid such interactions. The parents' psychological condition also influences the extent of their involvement, e.g. depressed mothers are less involved in their child's educational life (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This includes both home- and educational institution-based parental involvement, such as preparing the child for the day in educational institution and attending activities held at their institution.

Along with past experiences, the demographic characteristics of the parents, such as their socio-economic status, cultural background and ethnicity are also associated with parental involvement (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Hindman, Miller, Froyen, & Skibbe, 2012). According to Lareau (1987), the socio-economic status of parents is one of the

most important determinants of parental involvement. She argues that middle-class parents are more likely to attend activities held at educational institutions and follow their child's development more closely than working class families. However, with changing expectations in work life, this is also altering. Mahmood (2013) shows that parents with a high socio-economic status often focus more on their careers than on their kindergarteners' activities. Beside of the parents' characteristics, the process of parental involvement is also affected by the educational institution's environment. Berger (2008) argues that while a welcoming climate facilitates parental involvement, one that subtly tells parents to stay away from the 'teachers' territory' decreases the parents' willingness to get involved.

Even though the factors affecting parental involvement practices are well documented from the perspective of parents, not many studies have focused on the effect of early childhood educators' characteristics on the parental involvement process. It is reasonable to assume that, for example, experience in the field or their educational background is related to how early childhood educators relate to different types of parental involvement. Educators with sufficient experience in the field will certainly have an understanding of what works well and what does not. There are, however, studies investigating the effects of teachers' self-efficacy (Fisher & Kostelitz, 2015) and quality practices (Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008; Xu & Gulosino, 2006) on their parental involvement practices.

Parental involvement

The crux of parental involvement is that families and educational institutions should equally cater to children's learning (OECD, 2001). Uludağ (2008) defines parental involvement as collaboration between parents and teachers on a child's learning. Even though this broad description highlights the crux of parental involvement, it is not simple to provide a conclusive description for the term due to the possibly contradicting views of parents and teachers (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). For example, while for parents involvement in their child's learning might mean giving them what they need at their educational institution, for teachers, parental involvement might mean ensuring the parents' active participation at the educational institution's premises (Anderson & Minke, 2007).

Numerous terms are used to refer to this collaboration, such as 'parental involvement', 'parental participation', 'educational partnership', and 'parental engagement' (Driessen, Smit, & Sleegers, 2005). These terms often only slightly differ from one another. While 'parental involvement' or 'parental participation' are more passive terms, 'parental engagement' implies a more active role of the parent (Evangelou, Sylva, Edwards, & Smith,

2008). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) also argue that 'engagement' holds a more personal meaning than 'involvement'. Similarly, the term 'parental partnership' emphasises the proactivity and equality of parents in the collaboration process (Epstein, 2015).

Besides the different terms, there are also a number of theories that attempt to explain parental involvement by classifying the different types of involvement. Even though these have been developed by different researchers at different points of time, the different types of parental involvement proposed by these theories often bear some similarities to each other. Cervone and O'Leary (1982) propose four types of parental involvement: reporting on progress, attending special events, becoming educated and teaching. Williams and Chavkin (1989) on the other hand present six types of involvement in terms of the roles parents can play: audience, home tutor, programme supporter, co-learner, advocate and decision-maker. Similarly, Greenwood and Hickman (1991) suggest that parents can act as audience, volunteer, can teach their own children, learn and be involved in decision making. According to Hill and Taylor (2004), crucial aspects of parental involvement are volunteering in the classroom, communicating with the teacher, participating in academic-related activities at home, communicating the positive value of education and participating in the parent-teacher relationship. It can be concluded that these theories' focus is the parents and therefore the different types of parental involvement they propose are in terms of the parents' roles. On the contrary, Epstein et al. (2002) propose a framework of six types of parental involvement in which the focus is on the educators' role in this process.

The present study is based on Epstein's model given its comprehensive approach and its reflections on the educators' role in this relationship (Tekin, 2011). This framework works especially well in the Finnish context, because Finnish educators believe that the primary responsibility of parental involvement is of the educator (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja, & Silvennoinen, 2018). Epstein (2015) presents an in-depth structure for parental involvement in a model known as the 'overlapping spheres of influence' that categorises the crux of the parent-educator relationship into six types of involvement (Epstein et al., 2002):

1. Parenting: Helping parents create a supportive environment for their children.
2. Communication: Ways of informing parents about educational activities and their children's progress.
3. Volunteering: Parents' contribution to educational activities.
4. Learning at home: Activities given to parents to support their children's learning.
5. Decision making: Involving parents in the decision-making process of the educational institution.

6. Collaborating with the community: Integration of community resources and services for educational programmes.

In this study, the term 'parental involvement' is preferred over the others mentioned above. As Goodall and Montgomery (2014) explain, the collaboration between the home and the educational institution is a continuum. It begins with involving the parents in their child's education and, as the relationship grows stronger, the parents become more engaged with their children's learning as well. This study addresses the very first step of this continuum by placing focus on early childhood educators' views and practices of parental involvement. Parental involvement in this study is defined as a multi-faceted collaboration between parents and educational institutions in various activities. Four types of parental involvement are chosen from Epstein's parental involvement model—communication, learning at home, volunteering and decision making—because this study focuses solely on the educators' side of the process through educational activities established in educational institutions (see, Hakyemez, 2015). In this way, this study aims to uncover the current state of parental involvement practices in Finnish day care centres and the relationship between educators' backgrounds and their parental involvement practices.

Early childhood education in the Finnish context

The purpose of early childhood education (ECE) is to support children's development and well-being as well as to supply educational materials. It intends to serve children below compulsory school-going age (aged seven years). One year before entering compulsory school, children enrol in preschool education. After parental leave, all children below school-going age are entitled to enrolment in either day care centres or family day care facilities. Approximately 90% of children placed in day care are enrolled in day care centres (Terveyden- ja hyvinvoinnin laitos (THL), 2010).

Finnish day care regulations have changed significantly over the years. The legislation has essentially been a 'skeleton law', i.e., laws regulating the basic outlines, since decentralisation and legislative changes in the early 1990s gave more power to municipalities. In 1999, families received the subjective right to have their children placed in a day care facility (Day Care Act 36/73, 1290/1999). This right was amended to focus on children and became known as the revised Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, which was adopted in the spring of 2015 (Early Childhood Education Act 36/73). The revised Early Childhood Education Act (2015) emphasises that every child has the right to early childhood education. However, even after this child-centred change in legislation, there have been impairments that have affected the everyday life of child groups, e.g., the maximum educator-pupil ratio has been raised from 1:7 to 1:8, increasing the number of

children in day care groups. While a full-day child care group (for 3–6 year olds) usually has 20–25 children, a half-day child care group may have 25 children and 2 adults or 14 children and 1 kindergarten teacher. Family day cares have 4–5 children with 1 child minder, while group family day care facilities may have a maximum of 12 children and 3 child minders (Day Care Decree 16.3.1973/239, 22.10.2015/1282). The overall number of employees as well as the proportion of qualified teachers has also decreased (Kauppinen, 1995; Pihlaja & Junttila, 2001; OAJ 2009; Pihlaja, Rantanen, & Sonne, 2010).

Most of the duties of Finnish day care facilities are performed by kindergarten teachers and practical nurses, but the educational background of the day care staff varies greatly (Pihlaja, Kinos, & Mäntymäki, 2010). Finnish educational and labour force policy has reduced the required competence level for early childhood education and child nurse education. In 1991, 11 vocational degrees in the social and health care disciplines were integrated into a single practical nursing degree. Only 25% of pedagogical staff has a degree in teacher education (Pihlaja et al., 2010).

The legislation also emphasises the significance of educators working with parents to support them in the upbringing of their children (Early Childhood Education Acts 19.1.1973/36, 8.5.2015/580). However, although Finnish legislation requires partnership with families, it does not specify how this partnership is to be instituted (Hirsto, 2010). Past research on parental involvement has drawn attention to the variable nature of parental involvement in Finnish early childhood education due to the differences in educators' views and practices (Hirsto, 2010; Niikko & Ugaste, 2012). According to Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson and Waniganyake (2009), Finnish teachers often consider parents to be more passive than teachers from other countries, and they prefer to restrict educational responsibilities to the educational institutions. Räty, Kasanen and Laine (2009) endorse this by describing that parents' view parental involvement as cooperation by division of labour, in which they take the responsibility for the child's upbringing. The current study deepens the understanding of these views by uncovering the association between Finnish educators' PI practices and their backgrounds. This will give us a more detailed picture of the current state of parental involvement in Finnish early childhood education.

Research questions

The aim of this study was to investigate early childhood educators' views on parental involvement in general as well as on various types of parental involvement specifically. Using data collected in the Finnish context, we also aimed at analysing how certain background features of educators, such as the number of years of experience in the field,

are associated with their views. Thus, following are the two main research questions of this study:

(1) How do early childhood educators relate to parental involvement and different types of parental involvement?

(2) *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 work with?*

Method

Participants

Data were collected through a survey conducted over approximately five months with 287 early childhood educators working in one of the biggest Finnish municipalities. The data were collected in two waves using the online data gathering tool Webropol. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the ECE manager of that municipality. A link to the questionnaire was sent to the ECE expert in that municipality, who then forwarded it to all the ECE institutions in the same municipality (approximately 300 at the time). Finally, the principals of those institutions were asked to distribute the link to the educators. The total number of educators in these institutions was approximately 1200, but how many actually received the questionnaire is unknown, so a reliable response rate could not be calculated. Table 1 presents the detailed demographic information of the participants.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of participants' background variables

VARIABLES	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 years	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		
0–3	68	23.7
3–5/6	147	51.2
6–7	58	20.2
Mixed age	14	4.9

Note: Social pedagogy is a bachelor's degree in social services completed at a university of applied sciences in Finland.

In terms of ethical considerations, this study only targeted early childhood educators and did not pursue any details regarding under age pupils. Additionally, no personal information except for gender was gathered at any stage of this study, and the data was collected anonymously. The questionnaire also included space for the participants to give their informed consent.

Instrument

The instrument was a questionnaire created by the first author in English and translated in Finnish. It was designed to measure general views on parental involvement and attitudes towards its different types, based on Epstein's (2012) overlapping spheres of influence model.

The questionnaire consists of five parts. The first part entitled 'General views' (containing nine items) explores the respondents' general attitudes towards parental involvement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'totally disagree'; 5= 'totally agree'). The remaining four parts of the questionnaire focus on the different types of parental involvement. The second part entitled 'Communication' (containing seven items) measures the frequency of parental involvement through communication; the third part entitled 'Volunteering' (containing five items) focuses on the frequency of involving parents as volunteers; the fourth part entitled 'Learning at home' (containing six items) identifies the frequency of encouraging parents to support educational activities at home; the fifth part entitled 'Decision making' (containing five items) examines the frequency of involving the parents in the decision-making process. For these four parts, all the questions were based on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = 'Never' to 5 = 'Always' (See Appendix 1).

A reliability test was conducted for all the items in the questionnaire, and it was found to be reliable (28 items; α = .79). The test was also repeated separately for each section. Cronbach's alphas for these sections were found to be .6 (General view), .45 (Communication), .77 (Volunteering), .66 (Learning at home) and .62 (Decision making). Some of the items in the General views' section were excluded from further analysis in

order to increase the alpha level. Since the Communication section had a low alpha level, the items were analysed separately. The sum score of this section was not included in any ANOVA or correlation calculations.

Analysis

The first step of the analysis entailed converting the negative items. Next, factor analysis was performed for each section and for all the items together in order to assess whether the items measured the desired factors by showing how they clustered into factors. Finally, a series of Spearman's nonparametric correlations and one-way ANOVA tests were used to determine the relationship between the variables. In addition to these, the effect sizes and confidence intervals were checked to make sure the results were reliable and generalizable. For the items in the Communication section, frequency tests were run along with several one-way ANOVA tests in order to assess the relationship with the participants' background variables.

Results

According to the factor analysis, all the items fell under the desired sections in line with the five parts of the questionnaire. Therefore, it was not necessary to form new groups for the items and further analyses followed the original sections. The effects of the background variables on items in the General views section were explored through a series of one-way ANOVA tests. The results showed that while education level and experience in the field affect the general views of parental involvement, educational background and the age group of the pupils do not.

As presented in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference between the least experienced group and the most experienced group in terms of their general views on parental involvement, as determined by a one-way ANOVA (F[3,276] = 3.78, p = .011). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that the most experienced group of participants has a statistically significantly more positive attitude towards parental involvement (3.75 ± 0.53, p = .012) than the least experienced group (3.5 ± 0.54). There are no statistically significant differences between the other groups (p = .991 and p = .145).

As seen in Table 2, the one-way ANOVA found a statistically significant difference between the general views of participants who graduated from universities of applied sciences and those with degrees from old kindergarten seminars (F[2,267] = 3.79, p = .024). The Tukey post-hoc test showed that graduates of old kindergarten seminars have a statistically significantly more positive attitude towards parental involvement (3.78 ± 0.47, p = .019)

than graduates from universities of applied sciences (3.53 ± 0.58). There are no statistically significant differences between the other groups (p = .506).

One-way ANOVA tests on the relationship between the background variables and parental involvement types show that the participants' education level has no statistically significant effect on the implementation of parental involvement types. On the other hand, years spent in the field, the educational background of the participants and the age groups they work with do have effects on certain types of parental involvement.

TABLE 2 Results of a one-way ANOVA of the general viewpoints of Finnish early childhood educators vis-a-vis experience in the field, education level, educational background and age group of pupils they work with

EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD										
0–5 years		6–10 years		11–20 years		21–40 years				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(3,276)}$	p	η^2
3.5	0.54	3.54	0.63	3.7	0.55	3.75	0.53	3.78	0.011	0.028

LEVEL OF EDUCATION								
University of applied sciences		University		Old kindergarten seminars				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(2,267)}$	p	η^2
3.53	0.58	3.62	0.57	3.78	0.47	3.79	0.024	0.02

TYPE OF EDUCATION						
Kindergarten teacher		Social pedagogue				
M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(1,273)}$	p	η^2
3.67	0.54	3.57	0.61	1.96	0.16	0

PUPILS' AGE GROUP								
0–3 years old		3–5 years old		6–7 years old				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(2,266)}$	p	η^2
3.55	0.52	3.65	0.56	3.68	0.59	0.97	0.38	-3.37

Note: Some groups are excluded from this analysis due to their small size ($n_{master's\ degree}$ = 9, n_{mother} = 7, $n_{mixed-age}$ = 14, See Table 1.)

As seen in Table 3, there is a statistically significant difference between the least and most experienced groups in terms of involving parents as volunteers, as determined by a one-

way ANOVA (F[3,274] = 4.49, p = .004). The Tukey post-hoc test revealed that the most experienced group of participants has a statistically significantly more positive attitude towards this particular parental involvement type (2.54 ± 0.66, p = .002) than the least experienced group (2.2 ± 0.67). There are no statistically significant differences between the other groups (p = .218 and p = .259).

TABLE 3   Parental involvement vis-a-vis types of parental involvement, educators' experience in the field and educational background, and pupils' age group

TYPE	EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD										
	0–5 years		6–10 years		11–20 years		21–40 years				
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	η²
Volunteering	2.20	0.67	2.46	0.73	2.4	0.52	2.54	0.66	(3,274) 4.49	0.004	0.036
Learning at home	3.40	0.57	3.5	0.57	3.3	0.69	3.3	0.51	(3,270) 1.00	0.39	0
Decision making	2.38	0.66	2.67	0.57	2.66	0.65	2.65	0.52	(3,278) 4.34	0.005	0.034

TYPE	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND						
	Kindergarten teacher		Social pedagogue				
	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	η²
Volunteering	2.41	0.66	2.35	0.68	(1,271) 0.39	0.52	-0.002
Learning at home	3.40	0.57	3.52	0.57	(1,267) 2.25	0.13	0.004
Decision making	2.53	0.62	2.7	0.57	(1,275) 4.29	0.039	0.01

TYPE	PUPILS' AGE GROUP							
	0-3 year-old		3-5 year-old		6-7 year-old			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	η²
Volunteering	2.15	0.60	2.46	0.68	2.47	0.63	(2,264) 5.85	0.003	0.03
Learning at home	3.36	0.65	3.46	0.53	3.51	0.58	(2,260) 3.6	0.029	0.01
Decision making	2.41	0.65	2.59	0.59	2.63	0.55	(2,268) 2.56	0.079	0.01

TYPE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION								
	University of applied sciences		University		Old kindergarten seminars				
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	η^2
Volunteering	2.29	0.70	2.38	0.70	2.49	0.54	(2,266) 1.55	0.21	0
Learning at home	3.51	0.56	3.40	0.60	3.35	0.46	(2,261) 1.47	0.23	0.003
Decision making	2.65	0.56	2.46	0.65	2.64	0.51	(2,269) 3.17	0.44	-9.95

Note: Some groups are excluded from this analysis due to their small size ($n_{master's degree}$ = 9, n_{mother} = 7, $n_{mixed-age}$ = 14, see Table 1.)

The years spent in the field also affect the tendency to involve parents in the decision-making process. The one-way ANOVA results (F[3,278] = 4.34, p = .005), indicated a statistically significant difference between groups with different levels of experience. A post-hoc test shows that participants with 11–20 years of experience involve parents in decision making significantly more (2.66 ± 0.65, p = .03) than participants with 5 or fewer years of experience (2.38 ± 0.66). According to the results of the Tukey post-hoc test, the most experienced group is even more positive towards involving parents in the decision-making process (2.65 ± 0.52, p = .013) than the least experienced group. There are no statistically significant differences compared with the second group with 6–10 years of experience (p = .83; see Table 3).

Parental involvement in decision-making is also impacted by the participants' educational background (see Table 3). The one-way ANOVA showed that social pedagogues involve parents in decision making significantly more than kindergarten teachers (F[1,275] = 4.29, p = .001).

Besides experience and educational background, the age group of the pupils with whom the participants work also impacts the implementation of different types of parental involvement. As seen in Table 3, the one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between the groups (F[2,264] = 5.85, p = .003). The Tukey post-hoc test revealed that those participants who work with the youngest pupils tend to involve parents as volunteers significantly less (2.15 ± 0.60, p = .004 and p = .016) than those who work with 3–5 year olds (2.46 ± 0.68) and 6–7 year olds (2.47 ± 0.63).

In addition, the pupils' age group also influences the implementation of learning at home as a type of parental involvement. According to the one-way ANOVA test results, statistically significant differences exist between the groups (F[2,260] = 3.6, p = .029). A

Tukey post-hoc test showed that participants working with the youngest children favour learning at home as a parental involvement type less frequently (3.36 ± 0.65, p = .045) than those who work with 6–7-year-old children.

In addition to ANOVA tests investigating the relation between the participants' background variables and their general views and practices of parental involvement, we also measured the correlation between the general views of Finnish early childhood educators and types of parental involvement. According to the results, presented in Table 4, there is a strongly significant association between general views and types of parental involvement ($r_{volunteering}$ = .362, P = .00; $r_{learning at home}$ = .233, P = .00; $r_{decision making}$ = .317, P = .00). Additionally, strong correlations are observed among the different types of parental involvement (P = .00).

TABLE 4   Spearman's Rho correlation matrix of general viewpoints of Finnish early childhood educators and parental involvement types

MEASURE	GENERAL VIEWS	VOLUNTEERING	LEARNING AT HOME	DECISION MAKING
General views	___	.362**	.233**	.317**
Volunteering		___	.342**	.345**
Learning at home			___	.340**
Decision making				___

** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)   * $p < .05$ (2-tailed)

As explained, a sum-score was not calculated for the Communication section due to the reliability results; however, several one-way ANOVA tests were run for each item. The Communication section contained six Likert-scale items (see Appendix 1).

The results show that only three of the items had significant differences when compared to the participants' education level, type of education, field experience and the age groups they work with.

TABLE 5   Responses to the item 'I phone parents to talk about their child's development.'

LEVEL OF EDUCATION								
University of applied sciences		University		Old kindergarten seminars				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F_{(2,270)}$	p	η^2
2.27	0.94	1.94	0.82	2.40	0.98	6.88	0.01	

	PUPILS' AGE GROUP							
0–3 year olds		3–5 year olds		6–7 year olds				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F(2,269)$	p	η^2
1.97	0.96	2.13	0.87	2.40	1.01	3.45	0.33	

Note: Some groups are excluded from this analysis due to their small size ($n_{master's\ degree}$ = 9, n_{mother} = 7, $n_{mixed-age}$ = 14, see Table 1.)

As seen in Table 5, the one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between the groups regarding education level ($F[2,270]$ = 6.88, p = .001) and the age groups they work with ($F[2,269]$ = 3.45, p = .033). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that the participants with a university degree in applied sciences phoned parents to talk about their child's development significantly more (2.27 ± 0.94, p = .033) than those holding a university degree (1.94 ± 0.82). Additionally, the participants who work with the youngest pupils phone parents to talk about their child's development significantly less (1.97 ± 0.96, p = .026) than those who work with 6–7 year olds (2.40 ± 1.01).

TABLE 6   Responses to the item *'I share my weekly or monthly activity plans with parents.'*

	EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD									
0–5 years		6–10 years		11–20 years		21–40 years				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F(3,275)$	p	η^2
3.55	1.336	3.78	1.21	3.88	1.29	4.10	1.15	3.10	0.27	

	LEVEL OF EDUCATION						
University of applied sciences		University		Old kindergarten seminars			
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
3.53	1.26	3.83	1.30	4.15	1.14		
						$F(2,266)$	p	η^2
						4.31	0.14	

	TYPE OF EDUCATION					
Kindergarten teacher		Social pedagogue				
M	SD	M	SD	$F(1,273)$	p	η^2
3.94	1.24	3.57	1.28	4.86	0.28	

	PUPILS' AGE GROUP							
0–3 year olds		3–5 year olds		6–7 year olds				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	$F(2,265)$	p	η^2
3.12	1.38	3.97	1.19	4.41	0.93	19.54	0.00	

Note: Some groups are excluded from this analysis due to their small size ($n_{master's\ degree}$ = 9, n_{mother} = 7, $n_{mixed-age}$ = 14, see Table 1.)

Whether the participants share their weekly or monthly activity plans with parents, is impacted by their teaching experience, education level, educational background and the age group they work with (see Table 6). A Tukey post-hoc test showed that the most experienced group of participants share their activity plans significantly more often (4.10 ± 1.15, p = .014) than the least experienced group (3.55 ± 1.33). There is also a significant difference between the education levels of the participants; according to the Tukey post-hoc test, participants who graduated from old seminars share their activity plans more often (4.15 ± 1.14, p = .016) than those who graduated with a university degree in applied sciences (3.53 ± 1.26). Additionally, the participants who work with the oldest group of pupils share their activity plans more often (4.41 ± 0.93, p = .026) than those working with the youngest pupils (3.12 ± 1.38). Finally, kindergarten teachers inform parents about the educational institution's activities more often (3.94 ± 1.24, p = .028) than social pedagogues (3.57 ± 1.28).

Finally, the education level of the participants impacts whether they prepare monthly newsletters about educational activities to share with parents (see Table 7), as determined by a one-way ANOVA (F[2,270] = 4.33, p = .014). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that participants with a university degree prepare monthly newsletters about educational activities statistically significantly more often (3.78 ± 1.29, p = .016) than those with university degrees in applied sciences (3.27 ± 1.35).

TABLE 7   Responses to the item '*I prepare monthly newsletters about educational activities (trips, project work and study topics that will be focused on).*'

University of applied sciences		University		Old kindergarten seminars				
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F(2,270)	p	η²
3.27	1.35	3.78	1.29	3.42	1.11	4.33	0.14	

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Note: Some groups are excluded from this analysis due to their small size ($n_{master's\ degree} = 9$, $n_{mother} = 7$, $n_{mixed\text{-}age} = 14$, see Table 1.)

Discussion

Parental involvement is not only dependent on the willingness and resources of parents—there are several parties that have an impact on the process. The overarching goal of this study was to uncover to what extent parental involvement practices and views depend on the personal characteristics of early childhood educators. For this purpose, we analysed the general views and parental involvement practices of educators in terms of their work experience, educational background and the age groups of pupils they work with. Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model (Epstein, 2015) was adopted to assess the parental involvement practices as the first part of the continuum of the partnership between parents and educational institutions (Hakyemez, 2015; Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018).

Past research indicates that Finnish early childhood educators hold a positive view towards parental involvement (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018). The results of the present study show that the general views on parental involvement are impacted by their experience in the field, with a significant difference emerging between the least and most experienced groups of early childhood educators. The results show that more experienced educators have a more positive attitude towards parental involvement. These findings contrast with Fisher and Kostelitz's (2015) research conducted in Israel, which found that less experienced teachers are more positive towards parental involvement. Additionally, some studies conducted in the Turkish context have reported no impact of field experience on views regarding parental involvement (Sabanci, 2009; Hakyemez, 2015).

Apart from experience in field, the participants' level of education was also found to have an effect. For instance, the results show a significant difference between the parental

involvement views held by university of applied sciences graduates and those from old kindergarten seminars. This result correlates with the experience in the field, since the old kindergarten graduates are the most experienced ones among the participants. Sabancı (2009) points out that in the Turkish context, educators with an associate's degree, similar to university degrees in applied sciences, have a more positive attitude towards various types of parental involvement than those with bachelor's and master's degrees. However, in the Finnish context, old kindergarten seminar graduates have a more positive attitude than graduates from universities of applied sciences.

In Finnish ECE, staff members' educational background varies greatly and only 25% of those who work in the field hold a teaching degree (Pihlaja et al., 2010). According to the results, however, these wide variations in educational background do not affect how early childhood educators view parental involvement in general. Competence or expertise is not only an individual quality for it is also connected to the culture and place in which the work is done (see, Jalava, 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is noteworthy that the work in ECEC 'has become more collegial and it is necessary to expand the notion of individual expertise' (Happo & Määttä, 2011, p. 91). The lack of difference between educational backgrounds might stem from the idea that parental involvement is shaped by the Finnish understanding of day-care facilities rather than the educational background (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Välimäki (1998) states that in Finland, day-care facilities have been established to serve the work life of Finnish society rather than to serve children in the educational context (Hujala et al., 2009; Onnismaa, 2001). Additionally, Onnismaa (2001) claims that day-care facilities have stressed the privacy of homes and the privacy of the day-care facilities as these two contexts are unrelated elements in children's lives. This concern with privacy may explain why early childhood educators with different educational backgrounds still perceive parental involvement in a similar way.

The results point at a significant correlation between the various types of parental involvement and views on parental involvement. It is quite feasible that positive views towards involving parents in their children's education lead to frequent employment of different types of parental involvement. Hakyemez (2015) also found this kind of association in the Turkish context. The strong correlation between the different types of parental involvement might also be the result of considering 'volunteering' as the basis of 'learning at home' and 'decision making'. Perhaps any involvement in 'learning at home' and participating in the 'decision-making' process entails sparing time and is thus a form of 'volunteering'. According to Hakyemez-Paul et al. (2018), one of the biggest obstacles to involving parents is the lack of time. This concern also supports the assumption according to which all types of parental involvement are considered to be kinds of volunteering.

In addition to the correlations between the different views on parental involvement and types of parental involvement, the effects of work experience, educational level and background as well as the age groups participants work with were investigated. The results show that experience in the field has an effect on the tendency to involve parents as volunteers and in the decision-making process—the more experienced the Finnish early childhood educators are, the more they employ these two types of parental involvement. Finnish ECEC professionals also have a high level of professionalism (Alasuutari, 2010), which results in the separation of the day care facility and the child's home (Hujala et al., 2009). However, the difference between the participants with more experience and those with less experience may show that over time the early childhood educators realise the positive outcomes of parental involvement, begin to trust themselves and enhance their practice of parental involvement. Additionally, 'volunteering' and 'decision making' were stated to be problematic to practice (Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018), yet it seems that early childhood educators become more comfortable with employing these types of parental involvement as they gain more experience in the field. Similarly, most experienced participants share their activity plans with parents more often than those with less experience. This also shows that the more experience they gain, the more transparent their practices become.

It was also found that the age group of the pupils with whom the participants work affects their use of different types of parental involvement. As the age of the pupil group increases, the frequency of parental involvement in volunteering and the provision of learning at home as a type of parental involvement also increase. Additionally, those participants who work with the oldest group of pupils tend to call parents to discuss their child's development and share their activity plans with parents more often than those working with the youngest pupils. This result is surprising considering the needs of infants and toddlers. A possible explanation is that the youngest age group (0–3 years) is not considered to be a part of the formal educational system, and working with them is mostly seen as basic care-giving and nurturing (these groups can have three nurses or one teacher with two nurses). This understanding might be established in the culture of day-care as a microsystem, shaping the interaction of early childhood educators and parents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Even though the education level of the participants has no effect on the types of parental involvement they employ (volunteering, learning at home, decision making), it does play a role in the means of communication the educators use. Participants who had university degrees in applied sciences and graduates of old kindergarten seminars tend to phone parents to discuss their child's development more often than those who graduated from university. While old kindergarten seminar graduates share their activity plans more often than applied science graduates, university graduates tend to send newsletters to

keep parents informed about classroom activities more often than applied science graduates. One could speculate that old kindergarten seminar graduates are quite experienced in the field and are more open to communication, but the means of communication they employ still differ with the level of education. While applied science graduates and old kindergarten seminar graduates prefer more immediate means of communication, university graduates tend to use one-way communication.

Finally, educational background plays a role in how often participants share their activity plans with parents. Kindergarten teachers are more transparent in sharing their activity plans compared to social pedagogues. Social pedagogues who participated in this study were found to have less experience in the field than kindergarten teachers. This difference also might explain why, as discussed previously, kindergarten teachers are more open than social pedagogues—more experienced early childhood educators generally practice parental involvement more often.

Limitations and future studies

One limitation of this study was that calculating the response rate was not possible as many third parties needed to be involved in the data gathering process due to the regulations. This may have restricted the interpretation of the results to a minor degree, even though the number of participants was quite large.

Moreover, this study makes no distinction between private and public educational institutions or the different types of early childhood institutions (family day care centres, day care facilities, kindergartens); therefore, future studies should include these variables to deepen the understanding of factors impacting parental involvement.

Addition to expending the variables, future studies can be conducted in a different municipality or region for this study focuses only on one of the biggest municipalities in Finland. Considering that the decentralisation of education in Finland means the municipalities have a significant amount of autonomy. Furthermore, involving the administration in early childhood education institutions would deepen the understanding of factors affecting parental involvement practices.

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Appendix 1

Items by section	
Overall α = .79 (28 items)	
General views α = .6 (Factor 1)	
1. Parental involvement plays an important role in children's development.	Totally disagree – Totally agree
2. Early childhood educational institutions should have an open door policy for parents.	
3. Building a relationship between early childhood educational institutions and parents is the teachers' duty.	
4. Building a relationship between early childhood educational institutions and parents is the administration's duty.	Five-point Likert scale
5. Building a relationship between early childhood educational institutions and parents is the parents' duty.	
6. Education is only the teacher's duty.	
7. Parental involvement is not needed in the education process, because they are not competent in this area.	
8. Parents and teachers should work as a team.	
9. Parent meetings organised twice a year are enough to inform them about their child's development.	
Volunteering α = .77 (Factor 2)	
10. I invite parents to educational institution trips.	Never-Always Five-point Likert scale
11. I invite parents to join in classroom activities with their child.	
12. I invite parents to present their hobbies to the class.	
13. I invite parents to present their jobs to the class.	
Learning at home α = .66 (Factor 3)	
14. I give home activity ideas to parents to support the educational institution's activities.	Never-Always Five-point Likert scale
15. I assign the children simple homework to do with their parents.	
16. I encourage parents to talk to their children about their day in the educational institution.	
17. I ask parents to help their children with subjects that they have trouble with at the educational institution.	
18. I ask parents to play the same games at home that we play at the educational institution.	
Decision making α = .62 (Factor 4)	
19. I ask for parents' opinions with regard to planning trips.	Never-Always Five-point Likert scale
20. I ask for parents' opinions with regard to classroom activities I am planning.	
21. I ask for parents' opinions with regard to monthly lunch menus.	
22. I ask for parents' opinions when deciding disciplinary methods to follow in the classroom.	
Communication α = .45 (Factor 5)	
23. I phone parents to talk about their child's development.	Never-Always Five-point Likert scale
24. I talk to parents face to face to discuss their child's development.	
25. If the child does not attend class, I phone their parent the very same day to enquire about the child.	
26. I share my weekly or monthly activity plans with parents.	
27. I write journals for each child to inform their parents about their child's day-to-day performance at the educational institution.	
28. I prepare monthly newsletters to update parents on educational activities like trips, project work and study topics that will be focused on.	