

The Relationship Between Parents and Educators – from Cooperation to Partnership

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Abstract

Quality child development is enhanced by quality relationships among adults who interact within the child's environment. In preschool settings, numerous factors contribute to the quality of relationships between parents and early childhood educators (hereafter EC educators), including two-way open communication, mutual trust, voluntary parental engagement, aligned values regarding child upbringing and education, and a shared focus on the child's well-being. These factors result in joint actions by parents and early childhood educators, facilitating a developmental process evolving from cooperation to partnership. The results of a case study conducted in a mixed-age educational group (children aged 3-7 years) in an urban preschool in Brod-Posavina County, involving 8 parents and an early childhood educator, highlight changes in the educational process of the group during two academic years, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. Analysis of interviews with the early childhood educator, parent focus groups, and photographic documentation of collaborative activities shows that the early childhood educator's interventions stimulated active, voluntary parental engagement. It also shows that parents and the early childhood educator share the goal of achieving a high-quality educational setting and holistic child development. The essential foundation and catalyst for this positive shift in the development of partnerships between parents and early childhood educators lies precisely in the shared recognition of the importance of mutual relationships. This recognition ultimately results in partnerships guided by a common goal and shared interest, the well-being of the child.

Keywords : Child well-being, Early Childhood Educator Role, Parental involvement, Partnership with parents

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Introduction

According to the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2015), partnership between preschools, parents, and the broader community is considered one of the essential principles underpinning the quality of the educational process. Furthermore, uninterrupted, two-way communication between parents and early childhood educators is emphasized, and mutual acceptance among all participants ensures adequate support for the child's holistic development. The importance of communication and early childhood educators' openness to "listening" to parents and children results in greater awareness of parental culture and the child's personality (Edwards et al., 1998).

Engaging parents in planning activities encourages parental involvement and gives them insights into the child's growth and development within an institutional setting. EC educators' awareness of the importance of parents' roles in raising and educating their children determines the quality of the partnership. High-quality partnerships are based on continuity in relationships, a mutual understanding of the value of partnership, shared accountability for the child's education and upbringing, and open, two-way communication that gives parents timely and transparent information about educational activities (Bognar, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Hornby, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Jafar, 2015; Kambouri et al., 2021; Kovács et al., 2022).

Hornby (2000) argues that continuity and mutual recognition of the significance of partnership relationships are necessary for quality collaboration between educators and parents. Early childhood lasts until school age, offering extended periods of institutional education, allowing for continuous development of parent- EC educator relationships. Parental engagement, professional and parental competency growth, joint responsibility sharing, and parents' insight into daily group routines increase parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Jafar, 2015). Connections between parents, EC educators, and children are strengthened through mutual recognition of each other's importance and shared values aimed at child well-being. This approach aligns with the Reggio Emilia concept, emphasizing group belonging, mutual respect, and shared values (Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002).

Rinaldi (2006) defines the relationship as dynamic, involving continuous self-improvement and adjustment to mutual needs, transforming cooperation into partnership.

Activities include formal and informal cooperation or partnership forms, such as home visits before kindergarten entry, joint events, and trips (Rinaldi, 2006). Cadwell and Rinaldi (2002) highlight communication and information exchange through group newsletters, brief meetings, noticeboards, shared books, and digital platforms. Effective communication, mutual respect, and positive perceptions of all participants contributed significantly to successful partnerships. These principles emphasize group belonging and common values aimed at child well-being (Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006).

Recognizing the needs of parents and children, jointly addressing challenges, growing professional and parental competencies, and enabling parental access to daily routines led to increased parental involvement. Dynamics align with previous studies emphasizing cooperation in problem-solving, mutual trust, and shared responsibilities as cornerstones of effective partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2021). The partnership between parents and EC educator contributed significantly to the child's well-being, enriching the institutional culture and fostering a collaborative environment consistent with the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Rinaldi, 2006). As the partnership matured, participants continuously adapted to new situations and mutual needs, transforming parents' perceptions of early childhood education institutions and EC educators' professional aspirations.

Professional competencies among EC educator evolved through actions spanning from cooperation to partnership, involving diverse formal and informal activities such as home visits, parent meetings, shared events, and joint excursions. Effective communication and information exchange—via newsletters, brief meetings, noticeboards, shared books, or digital platforms—were crucial to maintaining quality relationships. Recent advancements in digital communication platforms have further enhanced this exchange, improving parents' understanding of children's developmental experiences in institutional settings (Yıldız & Durmuşoğlu, 2018; Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002). Robust parent- EC educator partnerships significantly improved children's speech, problem-solving abilities, and socio-emotional skills, reflecting the collective commitment toward the child's overall well-being and development. Understanding the child's family context enables educators to interpret the child's behaviour and family culture better.

Murphy et al. (2021) indicate that educators need professional skills in relationship-building with parents. Bąk-Srednicka (2018), applying Epstein's model, shows that EC educators have positive attitudes toward parental involvement and communication. Arseven (2014) stresses cooperative problem-solving as essential, while Kurtulmuş (2016) found that parental involvement significantly impacts educational outcomes, highlighting parents' need for better knowledge about children's holistic development. Through effective parent-EC educator partnerships, parents become more aware of their child's learning processes, observing improvements in speech, problem-solving, and socio-emotional skills (Murphy et al., 2021; Smith, 2014).

Conceptual Distinctions: Cooperation, Involvement, Engagement, and Partnership

In this manuscript, cooperation, involvement, engagement, collaboration, and partnership are treated as related but conceptually distinct constructs describing increasing depth and reciprocity in the parent-EC educator relationship. Cooperation refers to occasional, task-oriented joint actions undertaken to meet a specific, often short-term need. Involvement denotes parents' participation in activities organised and led by the EC educator, in line with Hornby's (2000) model of parental involvement, which is used throughout this manuscript as the overarching term for this dimension. Engagement is used more narrowly to describe the voluntary, self-initiated quality of parents' participation, irrespective of whether it was prompted by the institution. Although the two terms overlap, engagement and involvement are not used interchangeably here. Collaboration implies a more symmetrical, ongoing exchange of knowledge and decision-making between parents and the EC educator, while partnership represents the most developed form of the relationship, characterised by continuity, mutual recognition, shared responsibility, and a common focus on the child's well-being (Hornby, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks inform this study, and they serve distinct analytical purposes. The Reggio Emilia philosophy (Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006) functions as the broader pedagogical orientation that shaped the EC educator's practice and her view of the child as a competent and active participant; it provides the normative, contextual background against which the case is interpreted.

Hornby's (2000) model of parental involvement, by contrast, is used as the operational, analytical framework of the study: it informed the design of the focus-group questions and supplied the categories used to analyse parents' and the EC educator's responses. The departure from a Reggio-inspired description of pedagogical practice toward Hornby's model occurs at the point where the analysis shifts from describing the EC educator's professional transformation to systematically examining the dimensions of the parent-EC educator relationship itself. Hornby's (2000) model conceptualises parental involvement through parents' needs (for communication, liaison, education, and support) and parents' potential contributions (information, collaboration, resources, and participation in decision-making), and argues that continuity and mutual recognition of partnership are necessary preconditions for the movement from cooperation toward partnership. Complementary to this, Epstein's model (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016) distinguishes six types of parental involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, and emphasises the role of institutional policy in sustaining these forms of involvement over time.

The primary objective of this case study is to identify the processes and factors that led to changes in partnership development between parents and EC educators during the academic years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023.

In accordance with the study objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What factors contributed to the development of partnership relationships between the early childhood educator and the parents participating in the study?
2. What perceived benefits resulted from the partnership between parents and the early childhood educator?

Method

The case study involved one EC educator and 8 parents whose children attended an educational group in a preschool institution during the academic years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. The study was conducted in a public kindergarten located in Brod-Posavina County, Republic of Croatia. The participating educator had more than 20 years of professional experience in early childhood education and held a Master's degree in Early and Preschool Education. The educator was purposively selected because she was widely recognised within the professional early childhood education community for her exemplary pedagogical practice. She had extensive experience in disseminating examples of her practice through presentations at professional conferences and continuing professional development events, where her work was shared with other early childhood educators as an example of good practice. The educational group consisted of 26 children aged between 3 and 7 years and was organized as a mixed-age group. All participating children and their parents maintained continuous involvement in the educational process throughout the study period, encompassing the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 academic years. This continuity provided a consistent basis for a comprehensive and objective examination of the processes underlying the development of the parent–educator partnership over time.

The educational group was purposively selected because it demonstrated substantial changes in the development of the parent–educator partnership over two consecutive academic years. Throughout this period, the educator systematically implemented innovative practices designed to strengthen parental involvement, foster transparency, and encourage shared decision-making. This provided a valuable opportunity to explore the processes underlying partnership development, identify the factors that facilitated these changes, and examine parents' perceptions of the evolving partnership. As such, the case enabled an in-depth exploration of partnership development within its authentic early childhood education context.

Before the changes described in this study, communication and decision-making processes with parents were primarily based on established forms of collaboration commonly used in Croatian early childhood education settings. Parents communicated with the educator on a daily basis during child drop-off and pick-up times, while more formal interactions were

conducted through parent–teacher conferences, individual consultations, and parent meetings. These forms of communication provided opportunities for exchanging information about children's development, educational activities, and matters related to group functioning. However, a considerable number of parents were employed abroad and were therefore unable to participate regularly in face-to-face interactions and kindergarten activities. Recognizing the need to ensure equitable access to information and to strengthen parental involvement, the educator identified the need to provide these parents with greater insight into their children's everyday experiences and learning activities in the kindergarten setting.

Data were collected through interviews with the EC educator and a focus group involving parents, alongside an analysis of visual documentation of both formal and informal interactions between parents and the EC educator. Virtual pedagogical documentation facilitated visibility of the educational process, providing parents with direct insights into children's activities and learning. Formal and informal collaborations and the use of a digital communication platform were analyzed, highlighting increased voluntary parental engagement prompted by EC educator interventions. At the end of the study period, a semi-structured interview with the EC educator was conducted to identify changes in partnership relationships and influential factors behind these developments. Given parent- EC educator partnerships' ongoing and developmental nature, a continuous and consistent approach was crucial.

The researchers occupied primarily an outsider position in relation to the research setting and participants. They had no prior personal or professional relationship with the participating parents and were not directly involved in the everyday activities of the preschool setting examined in this case. Their involvement differed across the two stages of qualitative data collection. The interview with the participating educator was conducted directly by the researchers. In contrast, the focus group with parents was facilitated by the educator, while the researchers assumed a background, or “shadow researcher,” role. Prior to the focus group, the researchers provided the educator with detailed methodological guidance and instructions regarding the facilitation of the discussion, including the use of the interview guide, the sequencing of questions, and the importance of allowing parents to express their perspectives freely and without evaluative responses. The researchers therefore did not participate directly in the interaction between the educator and parents during the focus group. This approach

was intended to preserve the natural relational context between the educator and the participating parents while minimizing the potential influence of the researchers' presence on participants' responses. At the same time, the researchers acknowledge that their methodological guidance shaped the framework within which the focus group was conducted. During the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the qualitative material, this positionality was explicitly considered through reflexive discussion among the research team, particularly with regard to the different roles occupied by the researchers and the educator in the data-generation process.

The interview questions for the semi-structured interview with the EC educator were developed by the research team on the basis of Hornby's (2000) model of parental involvement and covered four broad areas: the educator's professional background and initial approach to working with parents, the triggers and stages of change in her practice, the specific strategies used to develop communication and involvement with parents, and her perception of the resulting partnership and its benefits for children, parents, and herself. The interview guide was reviewed within the research team for clarity and relevance to the study's aim before it was used.

The analysis followed a deductive qualitative content analysis guided by Hornby's (2000) model of parental involvement. The analytical process comprised five stages. First, all interview, focus-group and visual documentation data were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the dataset. Second, meaningful units relevant to the research questions were identified and coded. Third, the codes were organised into predefined analytical categories derived from Hornby's model, including partnership, communication, information exchange, opportunities for parental involvement, and parents' perceptions of early childhood education. Fourth, patterns across the different data sources were compared and synthesised to identify recurring themes related to the development of parent-educator partnership. Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to the research questions and relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation by combining data obtained from a semi-structured interview with the EC educator, a parent focus group, and visual documentation of educational practice. The prolonged duration of the study across two

consecutive academic years enabled continuous observation of the development of parent–educator partnerships rather than a single cross-sectional perspective. Dependability was supported through a transparent description of participant selection, data collection procedures, and the analytical framework based on Hornby's (2000) model. Confirmability was enhanced by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim quotations and documented examples of educational practice. Transferability was facilitated through a detailed description of the research context, participants, and the characteristics of the selected case, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar early childhood education settings.

The research team's professional background in early childhood education and in research on parent–educator partnerships informed the choice of Hornby's (2000) model as the analytical framework and shaped sensitivity to the themes explored in the interview and focus-group questions. Given this background, reflexive discussion among the researchers was used throughout data collection and analysis to examine assumptions about parental involvement and to check interpretations of the data against the raw transcripts and documentation, rather than relying on a single researcher's reading of the material.

The five categories used to organise parents' responses in Table 1 partnership with parents, the importance of information, the importance of communication, opportunity for involvement, and parental perception of early childhood education and care, were derived directly from the dimensions of Hornby's (2000) model of parental involvement. Continuity and trust in relationships, the content and flow of information, two-way communication, opportunities for active participation, and parents' broader appreciation of the EC educator's role were used as a deductive coding frame when analyzing the focus-group transcripts. Quotations presented under each category were selected as illustrative of a recurring pattern across multiple parents' responses, rather than as isolated statements, and were chosen to answer the research questions concerning the possibility of parental involvement, the role of communication and information exchange, and parents' perspectives on early and preschool education.

Since the partnership between parents and EC educator is a continuous and evolving process, a focus group was conducted in the following pedagogical year (2022/2023). By then, parents were already well-acquainted with the entire educational process and the EC

educator.

The research questions used in the focus group, which included eight parent participants aged between 30 and 40 years, of whom seven were mothers and one was a father, were formulated based on Hornby's parental involvement model (2000) and addressed to:

- The possibility of parental involvement in the educational process,
- The importance of communication between EC educators and parents,
- The exchange of information,
- The significance of partnerships in ensuring the child's well-being,
- Perspectives on early and preschool education.

Results

Research Question 1: How Did the Parent–Educator Relationship Develop from Cooperation to Partnership?

Across the two academic years, the parent–EC educator relationship changed from predominantly educator-led cooperation to a more reciprocal partnership. In 2021/2022, communication relied mainly on established forms such as daily exchanges at drop-off and pick-up, individual consultations, and parent meetings. Parents were therefore primarily recipients of information. The educator described her earlier practice accordingly: “Previously, I mostly spoke with them during information meetings, parent-teacher meetings, and at the door. That was it. I would pass on information to them.”

Professional Reflection and Openness to Change

A major factor initiating the developmental process was the EC educator's critical reflection on her own practice and her engagement with professional literature. She explained: “When I read the official document, I was unsure which direction to take. So, I decided to seek help from experts. I believe these are the children of the future and that the current approach—simply transferring factual knowledge—is not the best way of working. Change was also necessary for me, the children, and the parents.” Her engagement with the Reggio Emilia approach subsequently strengthened her recognition of parents as important

contributors to understanding the child. As she stated: “Now, I need to learn about the child to understand their thinking as much as possible. Parents help me in this process.”

Increasing Transparency and Access to Information

A key turning point was the introduction of a virtual communication group, initially suggested by parents who were unable to participate regularly in face-to-face activities because some worked abroad. The educator recalled: “Some parents worked in the field and could not physically participate in the group's activities. They suggested that I create a Facebook group. It turned out to be a great idea. Everyone could see what was happening in the group. Parents finally got insight into what was being done in kindergarten and how their children participated in activities.” Parents confirmed that this increased visibility was meaningful. R8 stated: “The educator regularly informs us about what the children did; we followed daily activities through a virtual group, and this gave us information about how our child spent the day.” R5 similarly noted: “Daily feedback helps in understanding the child, providing insight into activities in one place.”

From Information Exchange to Two-Way Communication and Trust

The data indicate that increased access to information gradually developed into reciprocal communication. R2 explained: “The virtual groups we have are helpful; the educators send us updates about what the children are doing, so we have insight into their activities and can comment.” R7 added: “We comment on the photos and videos with descriptions in the virtual groups and ask the educator if something is unclear to us.” Communication also extended to shared decisions concerning individual children. R5 reported: “We worked together on an individualized plan for my child because of their special needs. We discussed and agreed on things.” This reciprocity was accompanied by a strong emphasis on trust. R3 stated: “It is important to maintain that relationship, for mutual trust to exist, and for the relationship to be sincere,” while R6 summarised the relationship simply as “Trust.”

Expansion of Voluntary Parental Involvement

As communication became more open, parents increasingly participated in the educational life of the group. Their involvement included performances, workshops, improvements to the

outdoor environment, and participation in activities with children. R6 recalled: “We had workshops together where we made Christmas decorations,” while R5 described a Saturday activity during which parents “painted car tires for the outdoor play area and turned them into flower beds.” Importantly, participation became increasingly voluntary and self-initiated. R3 explained: “Through the virtual group, we ask the educator if there's anything we can help with.” R8 similarly described “many opportunities to participate in workshops, to spend an hour or two in the group as we wished, doing activities with the children, acting with them, and being involved.” The educator likewise emphasised that parents were welcome beyond occasions when their assistance was explicitly requested: “It was important to me that parents felt welcome in the group. Not just when I needed something, but every day. I allowed them to get involved whenever they felt the need or had an idea.”

Changing Parental Perceptions of Early Childhood Education

Greater insight into pedagogical practice was also associated with changes in parents’ perceptions of early childhood education and the EC educator’s professional role. R4 observed: “Today's educators are different. This can be seen in how they convey knowledge to children and their dedication. Everything is learned through play; there's no rote memorization or anything like that.” R5 contrasted current practice with personal preschool experience, noting that her perspective had changed from a model centred on “memorizing songs, washing hands, and doing worksheets.” R2 described this change more broadly: “Simply put, a child learns what they experience. Educational institutions, especially kindergartens and later schools, along with parents, help the child with all of this.” Taken together, these findings show a developmental trajectory from one-way, educator-led communication toward transparency, reciprocal communication, trust, voluntary participation, and shared understanding of the educational process.

Research Question 2: What Perceived Benefits Resulted from the Partnership?

The second research question concerned the perceived benefits arising from the developed partnership. Across the parent focus group and educator interview, the findings clustered around benefits for children, parents, and the EC educator. These benefits should be understood as participants’ perceptions; the study did not collect children’s own accounts or

independent developmental measures.

Perceived Benefits for Children

Parents associated partnership with children's sense of belonging, emotional safety, self-confidence, social relationships, and holistic development. R1 stated: "Children feel that we (parents) are also part of it," and R4 observed that "Parental participation in workshops means a lot to children." Emotional security was reflected in R5's description of "Security, knowing that both parents and educators will be there." Parents also perceived benefits for confidence and social participation; R2 stated that parental involvement "gives them freedom... so that children don't feel shy," while R8 reported that the virtual group provided insight into how her child functioned "in social situations." R3 emphasised continuity between home and kindergarten: "I shared all the information about my child so that we could maintain consistency both in kindergarten and at home."

Perceived Benefits for Parents

For parents, the partnership generated a stronger sense of belonging, greater emotional security, increased insight into children's daily experiences, and confidence in communicating with the educator. R8 described opportunities "to join the group for an hour or two" and participate directly in activities. The same parent emphasised the reassurance provided by regular virtual updates about how the child spent the day. Parents also described shared decision-making as a source of confidence, particularly in relation to individual needs. R5 noted: "We worked together on an individualized plan for my child, who has special needs. We discussed it jointly." R7 similarly highlighted the possibility of asking questions whenever digital documentation was unclear.

Perceived Benefits for the EC Educator

The educator perceived the partnership as strengthening her own emotional security, professional confidence, and reflective practice. She stated: "I feel more relaxed in my work, knowing that parents will support me no matter what happens." Increased connectedness also made it easier for her to acknowledge uncertainty and continue learning: "The more

connected I felt with the parents, the freer I was to admit that there is always room to learn more. When problems arose, we searched for solutions together and looked for relevant literature.” She further described shared activities as contributing to a sense of community: “We all spend time together. We always discuss together how we will participate in workshops or group gatherings. We try to plan activities to make sure we have fun.” Overall, the perceived benefits were reciprocal: partnership was described as supporting children’s belonging and development, parents’ security and participation, and the educator’s professional learning and confidence.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the transition from cooperation to partnership was a developmental and relational process rather than the consequence of a single intervention. Interpreted through Hornby’s (2000) model, the case demonstrates how parents’ needs for communication, liaison, information, education, and support became increasingly connected with their potential contributions through information sharing, collaboration, resources, participation, and decision-making. The empirical trajectory—from predominantly one-way communication to transparency, reciprocal exchange, trust, voluntary involvement, and shared understanding—therefore reflects Hornby’s emphasis on continuity and mutual recognition as preconditions for meaningful parental involvement.

The importance of information and communication in this process is consistent with previous research. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) and Jafar (2015) emphasise that parents’ involvement is strengthened when they have meaningful insight into children’s educational experiences and perceive opportunities to contribute. Similarly, Epstein and Sheldon (2016) identify communication and decision-making as central dimensions of family–institution partnerships. In the present case, digital communication was particularly significant because it reduced barriers created by parents’ physical absence and made pedagogical processes more visible. This supports Yıldız and Durmuşoğlu’s (2018) emphasis on contemporary communication channels in family involvement and Cadwell and Rinaldi’s (2002) view that documentation and multiple forms of communication can connect families more closely with

children's learning.

The findings also demonstrate that access to information alone did not constitute partnership. The relationship became qualitatively different when parents could respond, question, propose activities, contribute knowledge about their children, and participate in decisions. This distinction corresponds with Hornby's (2000) understanding of parents as both recipients of professional support and contributors to the educational process. It also aligns with Murphy et al. (2021), who emphasise educators' relationship-building competencies, and with Kambouri et al. (2021), who conceptualise effective parent-practitioner partnerships as reciprocal rather than unidirectional.

From a Reggio Emilia perspective, the educator's professional transformation is particularly relevant. The Reggio orientation views relationships, listening, documentation, and participation as interconnected elements of educational practice (Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006). In this case, making pedagogical documentation visible to parents appears to have supported not only information exchange but also a shared interpretation of children's learning. Parents' changing perceptions of early childhood education suggest that increased transparency enabled them to move beyond observing activities toward understanding their pedagogical meaning. This is consistent with the Reggio Emilia conception of documentation as a basis for dialogue and collective meaning-making.

The voluntary character of parental participation further distinguishes partnership from more limited forms of cooperation. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) highlight the importance of invitations and perceived opportunities in parents' decisions to become involved. The present findings suggest that the educator's openness created a relational climate in which parents increasingly initiated participation themselves. This supports the conceptual distinction used in this study between involvement as participation in educator-facilitated activities and engagement as a more voluntary and self-initiated form of participation. Partnership therefore emerged not simply because more activities were offered, but because the boundaries between professional initiative and parental contribution became more permeable.

The second major finding concerns the reciprocal benefits perceived by children, parents, and the educator. The reported benefits for children, belonging, emotional safety, confidence, social relationships, and continuity between home and kindergarten, are compatible with

Smith's (2014) emphasis on well-being within strong parent–educator partnerships. They also reflect the Reggio Emilia emphasis on belonging, relationships, and shared values (Cadwell & Rinaldi, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006). However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously because they represent adult perceptions of children's well-being rather than children's own accounts or independently measured developmental outcomes.

For parents, increased participation and access to educational processes appeared to support a stronger sense of belonging, greater confidence, and a better understanding of children's learning. This is consistent with research suggesting that partnership can strengthen parental knowledge and competencies (Kurtulumus, 2016) and that greater visibility of pedagogical practice can encourage constructive parental feedback and involvement (Li et al., 2023). For the educator, partnership was associated with emotional security, professional learning, and reflective practice. This supports Saltmarsh and McPherson's (2022) emphasis on practitioner motivation in processes of change and Murphy et al.'s (2021) argument that partnership requires continuing professional development of relationship-building competencies.

Overall, the findings suggest that the movement from cooperation to partnership is best understood as a recursive process. Transparency strengthened information exchange; information enabled dialogue; dialogue supported trust; trust encouraged voluntary involvement; and participation further deepened shared understanding of the child and the educational process. Hornby's (2000) model provides the analytical structure for understanding these interconnected dimensions, while the Reggio Emilia perspective helps explain the pedagogical significance of listening, documentation, participation, and shared meaning-making. The case therefore suggests that partnership is not defined primarily by the quantity of parent activities, but by the quality, reciprocity, continuity, and shared responsibility embedded in parent–educator relationships.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, as a single-case study involving one EC educator and a relatively small, purposively selected group of parents, the

findings are not intended to be generalised or directly replicated. They offer an in-depth, context-bound account of one developmental trajectory, and readers should exercise caution when concluding. Second, the purposive sampling criteria favoured an EC educator already motivated to reflect on and document her practice, and parents who voluntarily agreed to participate. This selection may have skewed the sample toward already engaged participants and contributed to the predominantly positive picture of partnership development reported here. Third, the study did not systematically seek out tensions, uneven participation, or instances of non-participation among parents, nor did it include the perspectives of parents who declined to take part. Consequently, the analysis may understate the difficulties or burdens that the development of partnership can place on some families. Fourth, claims regarding children's well-being are based on the perceptions of parents and the EC educator rather than on children's own perspectives or independent measures of developmental outcomes, and should be interpreted accordingly. Finally, the description of the preschool's institutional context, of the forms of communication and decision-making that were ordinary practice before the changes reported here, and of the demographic characteristics of the focus-group participants remains limited in this research. Future case studies would benefit from richer contextual and demographic detail to strengthen the trustworthiness and transferability of findings.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate the possibility of developing a partnership between parents and EC educators, provided several key elements are met. Since professional responsibility and an awareness of the importance of the educator's role and its impact on the growth and development of the child are essential, it is clear that this responsibility serves as a driving force behind many changes. The professional role of the EC educator is reflected in interactions with other educators, parents, and, above all, children. It is also a fusion of personal identity, initial education, and attitudes.

One of these key elements, the EC educator's intrinsic motivation, has transformed the entire educational process. This change is evident, first and foremost, in the educator's

implicit pedagogies but also in the broader environment. By changing herself, the educator also transforms the setting in which she operates, both in terms of physical-material and social aspects. By using documentation as a fundamental tool of pedagogical practice, the EC educator records children's activities, interprets them, and, upon reviewing the documentation, considers possible further actions to support children in their learning. Making documentation visible is the first step in developing a partnership between parents and the EC educator, as it encourages parents to engage in the educational process actively. The visibility of documentation helps in understanding the curriculum and how children learn, ultimately leading to shared values between educators and parents and a common understanding of the child. A range of activities aimed at fostering partnerships ensures numerous benefits for the child, parents, and educators. Through their shared focus on the child, parents and educators naturally provide benefits for themselves, forming a holistic, humanistic approach to contemporary education.

This study sought to determine how and why changes in the relationship between parents and EC educators occurred. However, this case study cannot be directly replicated or applied in practice as a universal model for developing partnerships. Instead, the outlined guidelines can inspire practitioners, encouraging self-reflection on their personality, professional approach, and professional responsibility toward children. This responsibility should not stem from a position of adult authority but rather from the perspective of a reflective practitioner whose goal is to support children in education, not for the present or past but for the future.

Thus, this case study's scientific contribution lies in exploring the potential for positioning parents as active participants in the educational process. Ultimately, this approach benefits not only the child but also provides multiple advantages for all participants in the educational system.

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