



ECEC Professionals' Views on Partnerships with Parents in Multicultural Classrooms in Four European Countries

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Abstract

Partnerships between parents and professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are widely acknowledged as important for children's well-being, learning, and development. As children with immigrant backgrounds often experience cultural and linguistic differences between their home and ECEC-environments, bridges between these two contexts might be especially significant for these children. Although European ECEC-classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, little is known about how professionals view their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms in Europe. The current paper investigates the partnerships views of professionals working in multicultural classrooms and how these are related to the professionals' practices and characteristics. Findings suggest that professionals have rather positive partnership views, although they reveal a potential for higher levels of shared beliefs with parents about the child. Furthermore, the findings indicate that several partnership aspects are predicted by professionals' multicultural practices, their diversity related self-efficacy and their own cultural background.

Keywords Partnership · Parents · Professionals · Multicultural classrooms · Early childhood education and care

Résumé

Les partenariats entre les parents et les professionnels de l'éducation et de l'accueil des jeunes enfants (EAJE) sont largement reconnus comme étant importants pour le bien-être, l'apprentissage et le développement des enfants. Comme les enfants issus de l'immigration sont souvent confrontés à des différences culturelles et linguistiques entre leur environnement familial et leur environnement d'accueil. Les passerelles

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entre ces deux contextes peuvent être particulièrement importantes pour ces enfants. Bien que les classes européennes d'EAJE deviennent de plus en plus multiculturelles, on sait peu de choses sur les liens entre ces deux contextes. Le présent article étudie les partenariats des professionnels travaillant dans des classes multiculturelles et comment ils sont liés aux pratiques et aux caractéristiques des professionnels. Les résultats suggèrent que les professionnels ont des plutôt positives, bien qu'elles révèlent un potentiel pour des niveaux plus élevés de croyances partagées avec les parents au sujet de l'enfant. En outre, les résultats indiquent que plusieurs aspects du partenariat sont prédits par les pratiques multiculturelles des professionnels, leur auto-efficacité en matière de diversité et leur propre origine culturelle.

Resumen

Las colaboraciones entre padres y profesionales en la educación y cuidado de la primera infancia (ECPI) son ampliamente reconocidas como importantes para el bienestar, aprendizaje y desarrollo de los niños. Dado que los niños con origen inmigrante a menudo experimentan diferencias culturales y lingüísticas entre su hogar y los entornos de ECPI, los puentes entre estos dos contextos podrían ser especialmente significativos para estos niños. Aunque las aulas de ECPI en Europa se están volviendo cada vez más multiculturales, se sabe poco sobre cómo los profesionales perciben sus colaboraciones con los padres en aulas multiculturales en Europa. El presente artículo investiga las actitudes hacia la colaboración de los profesionales que trabajan en aulas multiculturales y cómo estas están relacionadas con sus prácticas y características. Los hallazgos sugieren que los profesionales poseen actitudes bastante positivas hacia la colaboración, aunque revelan un potencial para niveles más altos de creencias compartidas con los padres sobre el niño. Además, los hallazgos indican que varios aspectos de la colaboración son predichos por las prácticas multiculturales de los profesionales, su autoeficacia relacionada con la diversidad y su propio origen cultural.

Introduction

Partnerships between parents and professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are important for children's experiences of coherence between two of their main social contexts and may create the foundation for future educational involvement. The bridges between these two contexts are widely acknowledged as essential for children's positive development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and are related to children's well-being and learning (Aghallaj et al., 2020; Epstein, 2018; Pirchio et al., 2013). European ECEC classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, and for children with immigrant backgrounds, who often experience cultural and linguistic differences between their home and ECEC environments, these bridges might be especially significant (Aghallaj et al., 2020). However, a substantial amount of research suggests that parents with immigrant backgrounds experience more barriers to creating partnerships with professionals than nonimmigrant parents (Hachfeld et al., 2016; Norheim & Moser, 2020; Shor, 2005; Sohn & Wang,

2006 Tobin, 2020; Van Laere et al., 2018; Yahya, 2016). The existing research on partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC largely revolves around parents' characteristics and experiences that might facilitate or pose barriers to creating partnerships (Heng, 2014). Although professionals hold a responsibility to facilitate partnerships with all parents in ECEC, only a few studies have investigated how professionals view partnerships in multicultural contexts and how their professional practices and personal characteristics are related to the quality of these partnerships (Kurucz et al., 2020). The present study aims to address some of these gaps in the literature by investigating how ECEC professionals in four European countries view their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms and how these are related to their professional practices and characteristics.

Theoretical Framework

Whereas all parents and professionals will have some form of a relationship, with diverging qualities, the term *partnership* describes a reciprocal relationship built on mutual trust and respect, in which both parents and professionals acknowledge their shared responsibility for the child's learning and development (Epstein, 2018; Simon & Epstein, 2001). Thus, the notion of a partnership is used to describe a relationship between parents and professionals who acknowledge each other as equal parts, working closely together with the child in the center (Epstein, 2018). According to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, children develop in different spheres of influence (i.e. the family, ECEC, the community), and these spheres can either be pulled together or pushed apart, by three main forces (Epstein, 2018). The first force is time, where Epstein finds that the most overlap is found in the lower age groups of children attending educational institutions. Next, the spheres of influence is affected by the parents experiences, philosophy and practices, and third, by the professionals experiences, philosophy and practices. Expanding on this, partnerships can provide both parents and professionals with opportunities to see the whole child as opposed to seeing the child in the educational and home contexts separately—as children live their lives in different spheres of influence (Epstein, 1987, 2018). However, Epstein's perspectives have been criticized for not acknowledging barriers experienced by immigrant parents, as well as their knowledge as parents (Doucet, 2011; Garg, 2021). Although partnerships with parents often are regarded as a desired goal in educational institutions, creating them may pose a challenge in practice (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017).

Partnerships in Multicultural ECEC Contexts

The research on partnerships between professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds has so far largely focused on parents' experiences and parental characteristics as predictors of parental involvement, and a majority of the research has been conducted in the USA (Norheim & Moser, 2020). Findings from these studies

suggest that professional practices designed to promote parental involvement predict parental involvement in ECEC (Calzada et al., 2015) as well as parents' home-based involvement in children's education (Chang et al., 2009). Parents also appear to be more involved in ECEC when they are more satisfied with their relations to ECEC professionals (McWayne et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, these results indicate that professionals' practices aimed at working with parents matter. However, there is still a need for more knowledge on the views of professionals working with parents with immigrant backgrounds (Kurucz et al., 2020) and on professionals' characteristics (i.e. background, educational level and self-efficacy) and practices (i.e. parental contact and multicultural practices) associated with the ability to successfully create partnerships with parents with immigrant backgrounds, especially in European contexts (Norheim et al., 2022).

In a German study by Hachfeld et al. (2016), professionals were found to be less satisfied with their relationships with parents in groups with a higher proportion of non-German speaking children. The authors suggest that this might reflect uncertainty among professionals when working with diverse parents and with differences in expectations and involvement styles. This is in line with previous literature suggesting that teachers generally feel poorly prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Slot et al., 2017).

Several professional characteristics could explain this lesser preparedness to work with culturally and linguistically diverse families, which could negatively influence the ability to establish partnerships. First, in a study on preschool teachers' perspectives on partnerships with immigrant and nonimmigrant parents in ECEC (Kurucz et al., 2020), teachers' self-efficacy was identified as important for family engagement. In the USA, studies have demonstrated that elementary school teachers' self-efficacy is related to the ability to involve parents in ethnically diverse classrooms (Garcia, 2004). However, Romijn et al. (2020) argue that working in multicultural classrooms requires domain-specific skills and that self-efficacy therefore must be addressed in relation to working in a multicultural context. The authors propose *diversity related self-efficacy* as an important self-efficacy dimension in multicultural classrooms (Romijn et al., 2020). However, the relation between diversity related self-efficacy and the ability to establish positive partnerships in multicultural classrooms has still not been sufficiently investigated.

Second, although studies suggest that parents with immigrant backgrounds often express a wish to engage in partnerships with professionals, research indicates that parents often experience a lack of opportunity to communicate with them (Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Hachfeld et al., 2016; Shor, 2005; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Tobin, 2020; Van Laere et al., 2018; Yahya, 2016). The *frequency of contact* between parents and professionals has been found to be positively associated with the quality of their relationships in an Italian study, although this study focuses mostly on nonimmigrant ECEC parents (Pirchio et al., 2013). However, as parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals often communicate across different cultures and languages and have unequal familiarity with the educational context of the host country,

it is reasonable to assume that professionals incorporating practices to ensure frequent contact with parents may be even more significant for creating partnerships with parents with immigrant backgrounds. Despite this possible positive impact of frequent contact, findings from a study from the USA show that professionals in general take more initiative and are more welcoming toward middle-class American parents (Heng, 2014). For the European context, there is still a lack of knowledge about how the frequency of contact relates to partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC.

Furthermore, findings from a Finnish interview-based study investigating immigrant parents' perceptions of the most important ECEC practices (Lestikka & Lipponen, 2016) indicate that in addition to daily open and attentive interactions with professionals, immigrant parents value professionals' efforts to promote cultural and linguistic diversity. However, knowledge of how these *multicultural practices* are related to partnerships between parents and ECEC teachers and of how this is experienced in other European countries is still limited.

A professional characteristic that has been found to predict parental involvement for some immigrant groups in the USA is having an *immigrant background* oneself (Calzada et al., 2015), and hiring professionals with bilingual and immigrant backgrounds is often regarded as the best means to facilitate partnerships in multicultural ECEC classrooms (Whitmarsh, 2011). The results from the Children Crossing Borders study conducted in the USA (Adair, 2016) suggest ECEC sites with immigrant teachers have stronger mechanisms to communicate with immigrant parents and have more positive views of immigrant communities. However, knowledge of the relation between professionals who have immigrant backgrounds themselves and their views on partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms is still lacking for the European context.

Last, in the research literature on partnerships between parents and professionals in ECEC, several studies have demonstrated that higher parental educational levels predict partnership aspects such as parental involvement and participation in the child's early education (see, e.g., Calzada et al., 2015; McWayne et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2014). However, surprisingly little is known about how professional educational levels and, more specifically, European teacher education programs prepare their students to work with families (Willemsse et al., 2016). In the USA, teacher training programs do not prepare teachers to create partnerships with all parents (Epstein, 2018; Tobin et al., 2013). Working with immigrant families requires additional knowledge and competence (Park & Vandekerckhove, 2016) and is a facet of professionalism for ECEC professionals (Nikoloudaki et al., 2018). In this study, we will investigate more generally how *professionals' educational levels* relate to partnerships forged in multicultural classrooms.

To address some of the previously described gaps in the literature, our survey-study is guided by the following research questions:

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of ECEC professionals' background characteristics per country

Country		Total	England	Italy	Norway	The Netherlands
N		130	42	49	16	23
Sex	Male	4%	5%	2%	14%	0%
	Female	96%	95%	98%	86%	100%
Age (years)	<i>M</i>	42.75	34.23	49.56	45.15	42.18
	<i>SD</i>	10.31	10.96	8.42	11.42	12.38
Education level (ISCED ¹)	<i>M</i>	4.54	4.50	3.83	5.26	5.63
	<i>SD</i>	1.75	1.97	1.84	1.61	1.31
Nonwestern background ²		15%	35%	0%	7%	14%

¹Educational levels were assessed by asking the professionals for their country-specific levels of education before recoding responses based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels for comparability (ISCED, 2011)

²We used Statistics Norway's definition of western countries (Daugstad, 2008) as all countries in Western Europe (except Turkey), North America and Oceania, all other countries were coded as nonwestern. Participants were coded as having a nonwestern background if at least one of their parents was born in a nonwestern country

1. *How do ECEC professionals view their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms?*
2. *Do ECEC professionals' characteristics and practices predict their views of partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms?*

We focus on the above discussed professional characteristics, including *ECEC professionals' education levels, backgrounds* (immigrant or not), *diversity related self-efficacy*, and *practices*, including the *frequency of their contact* with parents and their *multicultural practices*. We hypothesize that all of these factors are positively related to *ECEC professionals' views on partnerships* with parents.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

The current study uses data from the collaborative research project *Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society* (ISOTIS). The ISOTIS project was funded by the European Union¹ and aimed to combat educational inequalities and increase inclusiveness. Data were collected through an internet survey of staff working in formal and informal education in European countries (Slot et al., 2018). To provide knowledge about partnerships between parents and professionals in multicultural classrooms in the European context, we have chosen to focus on professionals from England, Italy, Norway, and the

¹ This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 727069.

Netherlands due to their varying multicultural contexts, with larger and smaller immigrant populations (Eurostat, 2020), and differences in the countries' ECEC traditions, varying from universal access from the age of 1 in Norway to universal access granted at the age of 3 in Italy (European Commission, 2019). Furthermore, policies geared toward integration have been linked to higher daily contact between immigrants and the majority population in European countries (Green et al., 2020). The four countries vary considerably in this respect, from a stronger multiculturalist orientation found in England to a quite strong assimilationist orientation observed in the Netherlands (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). In this way, we hope that we adequately represent the breadth and varied differences between European countries. We selected professionals who are working in ECEC classrooms in which 25% or more of the children have another ethnic-cultural background.² Descriptive statistics for the total subsample and for each country's subsample can be found in Table 1.

The youngest participants were found in England on average ($M=34.23$, $SD=10.96$), and the oldest participants were found in Italy on average ($M=49.56$, $SD=8.42$). Professionals in England, Norway and the Netherlands had mean educational levels above postsecondary nontertiary education, with the highest educational levels found in Norway ($M=5.26$, $SD=1.61$) and the Netherlands ($M=5.63$, $SD=1.31$), whereas professionals in Italy had slightly lower educational levels ($M=3.83$, $SD=1.84$). In Italy, none of the participants reported having an immigrant background, whereas professionals in both England and the Netherlands included higher proportions of professionals with at least one (often two) nonwestern born parent (England = 35%, the Netherlands = 14%).

Measures

Partnerships To measure how professionals view their relationships with parents, we used a questionnaire specifically developed for the staff survey of the ISOTIS project (Slot et al., 2018). The questionnaire asked professionals to respond to 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale rated as disagree (1), slightly disagree (2), undecided (3), slightly agree (4), and agree (5). We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation to investigate the underlying dimensions of the scale. Bartlett's test of sphericity, which tests the significance of all correlations within the correlation matrix, was significant ($\chi^2=173.003$, $DF=55$, $p<0.001$), and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of 0.60 supported the suitability of the factor analysis. The extraction of factors was based on eigenvalues of greater than or equal to 1, and interpretability was determined based on content. Moreover, only items with factor loadings of over 0.40 were included. Four factors were extracted and used in the subsequent analysis. For the scales with only two items, we calculated both Cronbach's alpha and Pearson's correlation. It should be noted that these dimensions do not cover all aspects of a partnership, but we argue that low levels of problem-oriented contact and hierarchical relations and high levels

² The professionals included in our sample reported working in classrooms with the following proportions of children with a different cultural background: 25% (13.8%), 50% (16.9%), 75% (26.9%), and almost all (42.3%).

Table 2 Overview of the four partnership scales

Scales	Items	Correlation	Cronbach's alpha
Problem-oriented contact	Parents communicate with me only when there is a problem	.56**	.57
	I mostly talk to parents when there is a problem		
Shared beliefs	I have similar beliefs as the parents about the children's behavior	.60**	.61
	I have similar beliefs as the parents about what the children can achieve		
Reciprocal relations	I welcome parents' initiative to contact me	.43**	.44
	As a professional I am responsible to seek contact with parents		
Hierarchical relations	I tell parents that as a professional I know what is best for a child	.49	.49
	I make an effort to have informal talks with all parents. (R)		
	The main responsibility for a child's development and learning lies with the professional		

^a(R) denotes an item recoded in the opposite direction. ^b** Denotes $p < .01$

of shared beliefs and reciprocal relations might describe a starting point for a positive and reciprocal educational partnership (Table 2).

Multicultural practices were measured using a 12-item scale ($\alpha=0.78$), where participants were asked to rate how often they used certain practices on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5) (Slot et al., 2018). Examples of items used include “I plan activities to celebrate diverse cultural holidays and practices” and “I adapt my work to take into account the children’s backgrounds.” The mean of all 12 items was used for this scale ($M=3.83$, $SD=0.62$, $Range=1.83-4.92$). For the mean to be computed, a minimum of 8 of 12 items (i.e., 66%) had to be completed by the participants. One item was worded in the opposite direction and was recoded.

Contact with parents was assessed with 6 items on a 7-point Likert frequency scale ($\alpha=0.78$) ranging from (1) (almost) never to (7) every day (Slot et al., 2018). Professionals were asked how often they discussed different topics with parents, such as their “child’s development in general” or their “child’s behavior or relations with other children.” The mean of all 6 items was used for this scale ($M=4.08$, $SD=1.20$, $Range=1.5-7$), requiring a minimum of 4 of 6 (i.e., 66%) items to be answered for the value to be computed.

Diversity related self-efficacy was measured drawing on the *diversity related self-efficacy* scale (two items) used by Romijn et al. (2020), where professionals were asked to rate their own competencies to “work with children from diverse cultural backgrounds” and to “work with children from diverse linguistic backgrounds” on a 5-point Likert scale where (1) denoted not at all and (5) denoted to a very large degree. The correlation between these two items was recorded as $r=0.60$, $p<0.001$.

Analysis

To investigate ECEC professionals’ views of their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms (research question 1), a descriptive analysis was conducted for the total sample and per country, covering all assessed partnership aspects. Next, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to investigate differences in partnership views between the countries, with the country used as the independent variable and with all four partnership aspects used as dependent variables. Using Pillai’s trace, significant differences in teachers’ partnership experiences were found between the four countries, $V=0.31$, $F(12, 375)=3.61$ $p=0.000$. This result demonstrated that we needed to take into account country differences in our further analyses. To investigate whether ECEC professionals’ characteristics and practices predict their views on partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms (research question 2), a multiple regression analysis was conducted for the full sample using the partnership aspects as dependent variables and diversity related self-efficacy, contact with parents, multicultural practices, immigration background, and educational level as predicting variables. To account for differences in the outcome variables found between countries, we included the dummy-coded countries as fixed effects in our regression model with Italy used the reference country. Based on the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot determine causal effects, and it is therefore

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for partnership aspects by country

	Problem-oriented contact			Shared beliefs		Reciprocal relations		Hierarchical relations	
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total	130	1.94	1.15	3.60	.84	4.71	.50	1.93	.85
England	42	1.78	.92	3.84	.72	4.51	.59	1.91	.73
Italy	49	2.36	1.33	3.51	.77	4.78	.46	2.19	1.03
Norway	16	1.75	1.15	3.71	1.07	4.93	.17	1.68	.56
The Netherlands	23	1.45	.79	3.29	.92	4.74	.46	1.56	.60

Possible responses include disagree (1), slightly disagree (2), undecided (3), slightly agree (4), and agree (5)

worth noting that the relationships found between variables might be bidirectional. Due to the small sample size obtained per country, we only report these results for the full sample. All analyses were conducted using statistical package IBM SPSS Statistics 26 for Windows.

Missing Data

A missing value analysis revealed that 8.4% of the data were missing. As 36 (27%) of the participants had missing values on one or more of the study variables, a complete case analysis would have resulted in a loss of 27% of the participants. Little's (1988) test of missing completely at random (MCAR) was conducted, testing the null hypothesis that the data were missing completely at random. The result of this test was not significant ($\chi^2 = 36.805$, $DF = 33$, $p = 0.29$), providing no indication that data are not missing completely at random. Multiple imputations were conducted using SPSS, producing 5 separate imputed datasets. All reported results are pooled results following Rubin's rule of pooling effect estimates on imputed data (Baraldi & Enders, 2010; Heymans & Eekhout, 2019; Rubin, 1987). All analyses were tested for robustness by comparing the results for the imputed data with the results for the nonimputed data. For results differing for the imputed and nonimputed data, findings from the original data are reported in footnotes.

Results

In this study, we wanted to investigate (1) how ECEC professionals view their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms in four European countries and (2) whether professional characteristics and practices could predict their views on partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms. To investigate how ECEC professionals in multicultural classrooms in England, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway experience their partnerships with parents, we analyzed the examined patterns

Table 4 Regression analysis for the partnership scales

Variable	Problem-oriented contact	Shared beliefs	Reciprocal relations	Hierarchical relations
R ²	.144	.179	.350	.168
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Multicultural practices	.021 (.196)	.407* (.156)	.282* (.088)	.187 (.174)
Contact with parents	-.046 (.097)	.031 (.075)	.074 (.045)	-.082 (.080)
Diversity related self-efficacy	-.226 (.176)	-.188 (.141)	-.005 (.073)	-.228* (.133)
ISCED	.110 (.064)	-.028 (.047)	.025 (.024)	-.035 (.066)
Immigrant parents	-.408 (.319)	-.375 (.213)	-.330* (.129) ¹	.311 (.281)

^a'B' denotes the unstandardized beta. *Denotes $p < .05$. ^bThe regression analysis is conducted with country fixed effects

¹For the original nonimputed data, this effect was not significant ($B = -.230$ (141), $p = .107$)

across the four partnership aspects, problem-oriented contact, shared beliefs, reciprocal relations, and hierarchical relations (see Table 3).

For problem-oriented contact, we see that the professionals on average score slightly less than 2 (slightly disagree), suggesting that they do not speak to parents only when there is a problem. The professionals' scores for shared beliefs on average range from 3 (undecided) to 4 (slightly agree), indicating still some potential in regard to sharing beliefs with parents on their children's behavior and on what they believe that their children can achieve. For reciprocal relations, the levels are very high (near 5—agree) on average, demonstrating that the professionals both feel responsible for seeking contact with parents and that they welcome parents' initiative to contact them. Last, the values of hierarchical relations overall are quite low, with the average score slightly less than 2 (slightly disagree), indicating that the participants do not see their role as professionals as paramount to the parents. Some mean-level differences are found between the scales of the four countries; however, the observed pattern across the four scales (i.e., lowest and highest scores) is very similar for all countries.

To investigate to what degree professionals' characteristics and practices may predict their views on partnerships with parents in their multicultural classrooms, a multiple linear regression analysis with country fixed effects was conducted for the full sample for each of the partnership aspects (see Table 4). In the interest of clarity, country fixed effects are not displayed. First, for problem-oriented contact, the model explained 14.4% of the variance, but none of the variables were statistically significant predictors. For shared beliefs, the model explained 17.9% of the variance with multicultural practices being the only significant predictor. Greater use of multicultural practices was significantly related to stronger shared beliefs. For reciprocal relations, the model explained 35% of the variance. Again, greater use of multicultural practices positively predicted reciprocal relations. Somewhat surprisingly, having an immigrant background predicted significantly lower levels of reciprocal relations. For hierarchical relations, the model explained 16.8% of the variance. Higher

levels of diversity related self-efficacy were related to lower levels of hierarchical relations.

Discussion

Partnerships between parents and professionals in ECEC are widely acknowledged as important for children's well-being and learning (Epstein, 2018). Although European ECEC classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, research on factors associated with professionals' abilities to create partnerships with parents with immigrant backgrounds has been scarce (Norheim & Moser, 2020). As most research so far has been conducted in the USA, knowledge from the European context is a valuable contribution to the literature in this area. The goal of the current paper is to provide insight into European ECEC professionals' views on partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms and to explore professional practices and characteristics that may predict the features of these partnerships.

Professionals Views on Partnerships in European Multicultural ECEC Classrooms

The first aim of the present study was to investigate how ECEC professionals view their partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms in four European countries. The answers given by European ECEC professionals reveal a pattern of partnerships with overall low levels of problem-oriented contact and hierarchical relations as well as high levels of reciprocal relations, indicating that professionals generally have quite positive views of partnerships with parents in multicultural ECEC classrooms. As reciprocity is a key factor in creating and maintaining a partnership (Epstein, 2018; Simon & Epstein, 2001), the high levels found in the present study are especially promising, suggesting that the ECEC professionals working in European multicultural classrooms feel a shared sense of responsibility to communicate with parents. These findings shed more positive light on professionals' views on partnership aspects than previous studies, which assert that professionals generally feel ill prepared to work with diverse families (Slot et al., 2017) and that they are less satisfied with their relationships with parents in multicultural classrooms (Hachfeld et al., 2016). Norheim and Moser (2020) found in a literature review that asymmetrical, hierarchical power in a relationship is one of the main barriers parents experience in creating partnerships with professionals. The results from the present study challenge this finding to some degree, at least from the perspectives of professionals in the four European countries studied.

For shared beliefs, the findings suggest that there might still be potential for professionals to share their experiences with their child more openly with parents in addition to inviting parents to share their experiences and views with them. As this partnership dimension involves sharing beliefs about a child's behavior and what the child can achieve, this dimension is essential for pulling these two different spheres of influence together; it involves sharing how they view the child. Parents and professionals will often observe a child in different contexts (i.e., in the home and in

ECEC settings) and interpret the child's behavior and abilities from their own frames of reference. This is the case for all parents and professionals in ECEC settings, but when parents and professionals have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, bridges between the two contexts might be even more significant (Aghallaj et al., 2020). The shared beliefs dimension is crucial to the teacher–parent relationship, especially when parents are first-generation immigrants and appreciate relying on a person from the local community who cares for their children, shares this responsibility, and supports their parenthood (Iavarone et al., 2015).

Possible Predictors of ECEC Professionals' Partnership Views

The second aim of the present study was to investigate possible predictors of ECEC professionals' views of partnerships with parents in multicultural classrooms. The findings suggest that the different partnership dimensions are related to different professional characteristics and practices. In regard to professionals' practices, both shared beliefs and reciprocal relations were found to be significantly and positively related to multicultural practices. The relationship between professionals' multicultural practices and their views of partnerships has, to the best of our knowledge, not been investigated previously. However, this finding adds to the knowledge provided by Lastikka and Lipponen's (2016) qualitative study, which found parents with immigrant backgrounds especially value the use of multicultural practices by ECEC professionals.

For hierarchical relations, we found a negative relation to diversity related self-efficacy. This supports Romijn et al.'s (2020) assumption that diversity related self-efficacy is an important factor in multicultural classrooms. In their study, the authors found that diversity related self-efficacy is positively related to multicultural practices used in the classroom (Romijn et al., 2020). The findings of the present study suggest that professional diversity related self-efficacy is also related to partnership views in multicultural classrooms.

For the professionals' characteristics, we hypothesized that having an immigrant background would positively predict partnership dimensions based on findings from previous studies suggesting that professionals with immigrant backgrounds themselves might have stronger mechanisms with which to communicate with parents in multicultural classrooms (Whitmarsh, 2011; Calzada et al., 2015; Adair, 2016). It was therefore surprising to find having an immigrant background related to lower levels of reciprocal relations, suggesting that these professionals welcome parents in contacting them to a lesser extent or see themselves as responsible for seeking contact with parents. This finding should be interpreted with caution given the rather low proportion of professionals with immigrant backgrounds included in our sample, and although their scores are lower, they are still relatively high. Nonetheless, this finding raises questions concerning the cultural embeddedness of the partnership concept. As the concept itself, as well as practices designed to promote parental engagement and participation, have a long tradition in the USA, and in other Anglo-Saxon countries (Hachfeld et al., 2016), a strong emphasis on educational partnerships can be seen as a predominantly western concept.

The cultural embeddedness of the partnership concept may be key to understanding the lower levels of reciprocal relations found among professionals with immigrant backgrounds in the present study. In a study of Korean mothers' perspectives on their involvement in US kindergarten and school education, mothers explained that educational matters are delegated to teachers in their culture and that opinions or suggestions from parents might be seen as disrespectful (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Similarly, Durand and Perez (2013) found that Latino parents question professionals about their practices or advocate for issues to a lesser extent than White parents of higher SES backgrounds. Hedges and Lee (2010) problematize how partnerships between parents and teachers are frequently taken for granted as a practice and philosophy in ECEC. The authors suggest that parent–teacher partnerships are often not intellectualized within teacher education programs. When teacher education programs do not prepare student teachers to create partnerships with parents, Hedges and Lee (2010) propose that partnership discourses might be so internalized within a culture that teaching students might reproduce practices from their own frames of reference without questioning them. Hence, our finding might be attributed to the fact that the partnership construct draws on western educational ideas that are rarely questioned and intellectualized within teacher education programs. We thus propose that studies on partnerships in ECEC assess how partnerships between parents and professionals in multicultural classrooms should manifest within a broader cultural context and with both parents and professionals.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations, and these should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample sizes used are quite small, and the results should therefore be interpreted as tendencies. Furthermore, no causal effects can be determined based on the cross-sectional data used in the study, and relationships between variables might be (partly) bidirectional, at least between the partnership scales and multicultural practices and diversity related self-efficacy. It is also worth noting that the data used are self-reported survey data, which can be sensitive to social desirability. However, the fact that we still found considerable variation in most of our variables with scores in both the low and high ranges lends support to the validity of our data. Last, the present study does not cover all dimensions of a partnership. As the concept of a partnership is not consistently operationalized in previous literature and may have different features across cultures and ECEC traditions (Hujala et al., 2009), no perfect operationalization exists. Although these dimensions do not cover all aspects of a partnership, we argue that according to Epstein's (2018) conceptualization of a partnership, our study covers several relevant dimensions, thus adding to the existing knowledge on partnerships in multicultural ECEC classrooms.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite the mentioned limitations, this study has several strengths and practical and theoretical implications. The findings of the current paper contribute new knowledge to understanding of partnerships in multicultural ECEC classrooms from the perspective of professionals in a European context. Overall, the patterns of professionals' partnership views suggest more positive views than expected based on previous international research (see, e.g., Hachfeld et al., 2016; Slot et al., 2017). However, the findings also suggest that there is still potential to strengthen their shared beliefs, which in turn may suggest a potential to create more opportunities for both parents and professionals to see the whole child as opposed to seeing the child in the educational and home contexts separately. Furthermore, higher levels of diversity related self-efficacy and more frequent multicultural practices were found to be related to more positive partnership views. This has implications for both preservice teacher education and in-service professional development in terms of having a stronger focus on effectively working in multicultural classrooms with a diverse group of children and parents and on implementing multicultural classroom practices relational processes always occur within a context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), and when the context changes, as is the case for multicultural classrooms in Europe, one must rethink how the processes should develop.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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