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Teacher–parent relationships: what contextual and teacher characteristics contribute to relationships with parents of diverse backgrounds?

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ABSTRACT

Teacher–parent relationships are important for children’s well-being and school functioning, especially for children with an ethnically diverse and/or low socioeconomic status (SES) background, considered to be at risk of academic failure. This study examined positive and negative attributes of this relationship and possible teacher and classroom determinants among 449 early childhood (ECE) and primary schoolteachers in England, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland. These countries have varying diversity in the population and implement different approaches in building relationships with parents. We also studied potential differences between ECE and primary schoolteachers. Exploratory factor analysis revealed four interrelated, but distinct aspects in teacher–parent relations: *shared beliefs with parents, reciprocity, hierarchy, and problem-related contact*. The adoption of culturally sensitive classroom practices showed consistent associations with teacher–parent relations. Teachers who declared to be more culturally responsive in their classroom reported more shared beliefs and reciprocity in the relation with parents and less hierarchy and problem-oriented contact. Moreover, ECE teachers reported comparatively more positive and less negative relations with parents than primary schoolteachers. Altogether, the notion of ‘culturally responsive partnerships’ appears specifically important. Implications for improving practice concern a stronger focus on developing intercultural competences in pre- and in-service education.

KEYWORDS

Culturally responsive teacher–parent relationships; ethnic and socioeconomic diversity; ECE and primary education; educational and inclusive policies; pre- and in-service training

SUSTAINABLE

DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG4 quality education; SDG10 reduced inequalities

The relationship between the family and the early childhood education (ECE) or primary school context, the two basic microsystems of development following Bronfenbrenner’s model (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994), has been found to influence

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children's long-term socialization and learning (Weiss et al. 2005). A positive teacher–parent relation, indicative of a strong mesosystem describing the connections between children's proximal socialization contexts, seems beneficial for children's social-emotional behaviour, academic motivation, and school performance (Boonk et al. 2018; Castro et al. 2015; Sheridan et al. 2012), which is especially salient for children from ethnically or linguistically diverse backgrounds and/or from low socioeconomic status (SES) families, considered to be at risk of academic failure. Within the context of increasing diversity, there is an important role for teachers in building relations with parents (Epstein 2001) to improve inclusion and planning of educational programmes based on understanding of the parents and children's needs (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Kroeger and Lash 2011).

This study investigates how teacher–parent relationships are shaped in diverse contexts by focusing on teachers' reports of their relationships with parents in ECE and primary education in the context of ethnic, linguistic and/or socioeconomic diversity. We applied a comparative approach across six European countries, namely England, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland, implementing different approaches and policies to address the sociocultural diversity reflecting broader societal or political values (Elbers and de Haan 2014). We developed a questionnaire and used exploratory factor analysis and path analysis to explore the contextual nature of the teacher–parent relationship by answering three questions: (1) is it possible to describe the teacher–parent relationship through an ecologically valid construct that is comparable and applicable in different countries?, (2) which teacher and contextual characteristics are associated with this relationship? and (3) are there any differences between ECE and primary education? In doing so, this study provides new insights in possible determinants of the teacher–parent relationship in diverse contexts at the level of the individual teacher and the classroom context, with potential implications for improving this relationship from the part of the teacher.

Teacher–parent relationships

Teacher–parent relationships are portrayed through a continuum of negative and positive attributes (Petrogiannis and Penderi 2014). Negative relationships reveal conflict, hierarchical impositions and controlling behaviours, reflecting teachers' and parents' opposite goals and incongruent expectations (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain 2017; Harpaz and Grinshtain 2020). Teachers sometimes view parents as intruders in their professional role and treat them with suspicion or even hostility (Abrams and Gibbs 2002; Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2008).

Positive relationships include open communication, respect for differences, shared beliefs, power, warmth and support, honesty, mutuality, and connectedness (Bempechat and Shernoff 2012; Ellis, Lock, and Lummis 2015; Minke et al. 2014). A welcoming climate in educational settings combined with explicit teacher invitations for culture-relevant parental involvement strengthens positive teacher–parent relations (Green et al. 2007) and parents' eagerness to seek teachers' support (Harpaz and Grinshtain 2020; Li and Fischer 2017), which enhances school adjustment and learning (Thijs and Eilbracht 2012). Due to differences in cultural capital, bulks of knowledge and ways to relate to the world, especially regarding parents from low SES or/and non-dominant

ethnic groups (Daniel 2011), teachers may find it challenging to connect with them (Gartmeier, Gebhardt, and Dotger 2016; Pillet-Shore 2015). Some studies revealed that teachers interact with ethnically diverse and low SES parents mostly to solve problems with children's behaviour or learning gaps (Minke et al. 2014; Pillet-Shore 2015), forming relationships that are conflictual or hierarchical in nature (Adams and Christenson 2000).

Culturally responsive partnerships refer to teachers' positive relations with families from diverse backgrounds (Beneke and Cheatham 2016; Timmerman et al. 2016). Welcoming parents and valuing their ideas/expectations about their children and the heritage language use are important in designing effective learning experiences and promoting collaboration and trusting relationships (Baker et al. 2016; Emerson et al. 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus 2011; Guo 2012).

The role of teacher characteristics

Following Bronfenbrenner's framework (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994), teacher and parent characteristics affect their beliefs on their role, engagement and relationships, which in turn determine the quality of interaction with each other (Lewis, Kim, and Bey 2011). Most studies have focused on parent characteristics as predictors (Durand 2011; Kim 2009; Norheim and Moser 2020), but teachers also influence these relationships (Seitsinger et al. 2008). Teachers' perceptions, especially regarding their role and efficacy, have been shown to predict parental connections with the school, regardless of ethnic and socioeconomic factors (Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, and Aupperlee 2009).

Teachers' self-efficacy relates positively to parent-teacher relationships (Chung, Marvin, and Churchill 2005). Teachers who are confident about their teaching seem more inviting towards parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002), communicate more frequently with them (Kim 2009) and show more positive beliefs towards (minority) parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2002; Moosa, Karabenick, and Adams 2001). Specifically, diversity-related self-efficacy seems important in multicultural classrooms (Romijn et al. 2020).

Fewer studies examined the associations between teachers' work experience and their relations with parents. In Head Start programmes teachers' longer experience was related to more active parent participation (Castro et al. 2004). Also, more experienced Estonian teachers had more trusting attitudes towards mothers compared to less experienced teachers, but this was not found for Finnish teachers (Kikas et al. 2016).

Early childhood and primary school education

Bronfenbrenner's theory stresses the importance of time in shaping microsystemic and mesosystemic processes (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994), especially during transition processes, such as from ECE to primary education. Even though both institutions ultimately share the same overarching goal of preparing children to function in society (Einarsdottir 2006; Skouteris, Watson, and Lum 2012), different beliefs and ideas about teaching processes and the content are evident (Day and Goffin 1994; File and Gullo 2002).

Despite the importance of family-school partnerships throughout children's ECE and school career (Avvisati, Besbas, and Guyon 2010; Borgonovi and Montt 2012), parents' involvement has appeared to be the highest in the early years (Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye 2000; Dearing et al. 2006; Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison 2015). An Australian study confirmed a decline, showing that teacher-parent contact became increasingly formal during primary school, based on typical parent-teacher meetings (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison 2015). Meanwhile, many studies have highlighted that parents prefer more informal contact that is timely and not necessarily problem-oriented, especially parents with minority backgrounds (Kim 2009).

Policy contexts

The way ECE and primary school teachers interact with parents reflects in part how this is grounded in (national) policies or curricula, referring to Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem. The six European countries involved in this study provide different contexts for understanding teacher-parent relations. In most countries the role of parents in (early) education is included in the curriculum, as in England, Italy, Norway and Poland, national steering documents, as in Greece, or in national policies, as in the Netherlands, Norway (Department for Education and Skills 2007; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 2017; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017; Singer and Kleerekoper 2009), but this seems to be more elaborated in ECE as compared to primary education. Still, approaches in relating with parents remain rather general, resulting in local variation at the ECE or school level (Francot 2021).

In some countries, targeted approaches are used to strengthen the school-family connections. In England and the Netherlands, there are services supporting ethnic minority parents in enhancing their understanding of the education system. Conversely, in Greece, educational policy for the Roma population is lacking despite being one of the most marginalized and impoverished groups (Dragonas 2012; Parthenis and Fragoulis 2020). Regarding diversity and acceptance of differences there is some acknowledgement in (national) curricula or curricular guidelines across countries, but only in England, Italy and Norway there is a more prominent role of interculturality in (early) education (Department for Education and Skills 2007; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 2017; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017).

Also, differences in immigration history may play a role in the approach towards diversity and inclusion. For instance, in the Italian context where immigration is relatively new, the relationship between ECE or school and families is approached from an intercultural context based on positive and collaborative relationship styles (Granata, Mejri, and Rizzi 2016). In England, the inherent diversity within and across ethnic groups is reflected in the general inclusive and culture-sensitive strategy towards parents, either implicitly or explicitly (Department for Education and Skills 2007).

Furthermore, many countries have legislation and/or other regulatory measures to ensure equity and inclusion in education (OECD 2023). Most countries use socioeconomic background, sometimes combined with linguistic or ethnic background, as eligibility criteria for additional language support in the classroom, as in England, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, or in special programmes as in Greece. In Poland, children from

specific national and ethnic minorities are entitled to additional support aimed at sustaining heritage language and culture (Sejm of the Republic of Poland 2005) but no support is given to other ethnic groups.

The current knowledge base on teacher–parent relationships is mostly derived from American studies adopting different definitions and conceptualisations of the concept often disregarding important contextual characteristics. This complicates our understanding of how teacher–parent relations are constructed and implemented in daily practice in European classrooms. This study aims to address these gaps by adopting an ecological perspective and comparing early childhood and primary education settings in different European countries. This supports the cultural validity and provides valuable insights for teachers and policymakers.

Current study

Following Bronfenbrenner’s theory, we investigate teacher–parent relationships adopting a contextual approach to address the dynamics of the different ecosystems that help shape these relations, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the construct (Martinez-Torres et al. 2021). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate teacher–parent relationships in different European countries with varying policies and approaches towards parents and inclusiveness in (early) education. We expect differences in the way teacher–parent relations are shaped, resulting from the interplay between the macro-, meso- and microsystems across countries.

Secondly, we examine how teacher and contextual characteristics contribute to this relationship, focusing on the microsystemic level. Teacher characteristics, such as education level and work experience, are complemented with teachers’ self-efficacy related to dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity. Moreover, teachers’ culturally sensitive practices are included as an important aspect of the classroom context, which can be seen as reflecting differences in national or local policies and (curricular) practices towards building partnerships with parents of diverse backgrounds. Also, the degree of diversity in the daily context of teachers is included to study whether this affects their relations with parents.

Lastly, we study differences between ECE and primary education, considering the effect of the chronosystem in the parent-teacher relationship and we hypothesize, based on previous work, that ECE teachers relate more positively to parents. Given the limited research, especially from an ecological perspective and examining numerous factors across several countries in one study, and the mixed findings, we take an explorative approach in analysing the determinants of teacher–parent relationships. However, we expect that contextual classroom features matter.

Method

Sampling

The study was conducted as part of the EU-funded project *Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society* (ISOTIS) (Slot et al. 2018) aimed to contribute to policy and practice development at different system levels to effectively combat early arising and persisting educational inequalities. The current paper used data on 449

teachers (93% female) working in ECE and primary education in England, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland (Slot et al. 2024). Participating centres and schools were public, except for some ECE centres in Norway and the Netherlands, which reflect the hybrid ECE system in these countries. The prevalence of women in the survey reflects the disparity among ECE and primary school teachers in the included countries, ranging from 88% in Poland (Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2021) to 97% in Italy (Openpolis - Con i Bambini 2022).

These countries were selected as they represent variation in socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of families (Eurostat 2018) and different traditions in working with them. In all countries, except Greece and Norway, a targeted approach of purposive sampling was used for recruitment. In two sites per country, areas characterized by high proportions of socioeconomically, culturally, and/or linguistically diverse families were selected, where ECE centres and primary schools were identified for recruitment. Centres and schools were contacted personally and approached for participation. The response rate ranged from 52% in England and Italy, 74% in the Netherlands to 100% in Poland. For Greece and Norway (due to different regulations) a more general approach was used in which school directors were approached with the request to forward the information and the questionnaire to teachers, with response rates of 22% for Norway and 43% for Greece.

Regarding teachers' education level, expressed in International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the largest group of 41% were graduates of tertiary and bachelor programmes. Descriptive statistics of teachers' characteristics are presented in Table 1. Differences in educational qualifications based on the type of setting professionals worked in as well as country differences appeared. Professionals working in ECE had lower educational qualifications with a majority at ISCED level 6 or a bachelor's degree. Primary school teachers were more often educated at ISCED 7 or higher, a master's degree.

Measures and procedures

The online questionnaire was based on adapted scales of existing measures and piloted in all countries, originally developed in English and translated into nine other languages. The survey could be completed in 30–45 min. We used the following aspects:

Pre-service education

The highest completed educational level, based on the international ISCED standard levels ranging from (1) primary school to (8) PhD degree (ISCED 2011).

Work experience

The number of years they have been working within education, including previous workplaces.

Cultural self-efficacy

Diversity-related self-efficacy beliefs are related to the extent they feel competent in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Romijn et al. 2020). Answers were rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all), 2 (very

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for teacher and contextual characteristics.

	England (N = 75)		Greece (N = 130)		Italy (N = 110)		Netherlands (N = 42)		Norway (N = 39)		Poland (N = 53)		Total (N = 449)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age (years)	35.80	10.64	41.20	9.04	48.99	9.18	44.38	12.24	43.48	11.75	39.40	11.00	42.66	11.07
Work experience (years)	11.03	8.82	15.68	8.71	23.25	12.20	19.73	11.51	17.31	11.54	11.45	11.45	16.75	11.41
Cultural self-efficacy (1–5)	3.92	0.66	3.64	0.79	3.68	0.64	4.23	0.64	4.21	0.60	3.20	1.08	3.76	0.80
Culturally sensitive practices (1–5)	4.13	0.54	3.10	0.87	3.63	0.74	3.49	0.62	3.66	0.51	2.95	0.89	3.47	0.83
Diversity in organization (1–4)	3.31	0.75	1.91	0.50	3.10	1.21	3.59	1.30	2.97	0.76	1.50	0.32	2.64	1.13
Education level (%)														
ISCED ½	6.3		–		5.1		–		–		2.2		2.6	
ISCED ¾	17.5		6.5		46.4		15.4		2.8		17.8		20.0	
ISCED 5/6	23.8		67.9		13.4		59.0		88.9		11.1		41.7	
ISCED 7/8	52.4		25.7		35.1		25.6		8.3		68.9		35.7	
Type of setting														
ECE	53.3%		47.7%		50.0%		54.8%		30.8%		60.4%		49.9%	
Primary school	46.7%		52.3%		50.0%		45.2%		69.2%		39.6%		50.1%	

little), 3 (somewhat), 4 (quite well), to 5 (to a very large degree). The construct based on 2 items was found to have satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$; ranging from NO $\alpha = .64$ to α PL = .87).

Culturally sensitive practices

Frequency of adopting culturally responsive practices on a scale ranging from never (1), sometimes (2), regularly (3), often (4), to always (5). The 12 items included in the scale referred to activities, integration of different values, using diverse materials and provision of information in different languages to parents. This scale has shown to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$; ranging from NO $\alpha = .74$ to α PL = .87).

Relationship with parents

Aspects of their relationship with parents on 12 (positively and negatively worded) items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree), 2 (slightly disagree), 3 (undecided), 4 (slightly agree), to 5 (agree). This scale captures aspects, such as shared beliefs, contact and communication with parents.

Type of setting

Place of work ECE (coded as 0) or primary education (coded as 1).

Diversity in the organization

Estimated proportion of children from low-income/low-educated families and/or with diverse linguistic, cultural or ethnic (Roma) minority background in their organization. Answers referring to these different types of diversity (socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural and ethnic) were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (almost none), 2 (around 25%), 3 (around 50%), 4 (around 75%), to 5 (almost all). The estimated levels of diversity show considerable overlap in most countries, and the scale was intended to capture the proportion of diversity rather than the origin; thus, a mean score was calculated as a diversity of context measure following prior work with this dataset (Romijn et al. 2020) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$; from PL $\alpha = .42$ to α NL = .82. Note that at the time of the study in Poland the diversity related mostly to socioeconomic background as it was not a typical immigration country, resulting in a lower alpha due to limited variability on the other diversity items).

Ethical considerations

The study was ethically approved by the Faculty Ethics Review Board of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Participants received a detailed letter outlining the study's objectives, procedures, data management, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. They provided active consent to the use of their anonymized data for publication purposes.

Analysis

To investigate the nature of the teacher–parent relationship, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using oblique rotation (oblimin) with weighted scores to address

unequal sample sizes, set to 74.83 for all countries. Bartlett's test of sphericity (Bartlett 1950) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic (Kaiser 1970) were used to determine the appropriateness of factor analysis. Then, a principal component extraction was used, with an oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization with a delta of zero, also called a direct quartimin, which allows the observed variables to be correlated and produces more realistic and statistically more appropriate factor structures than orthogonal methods. There was some missing data at the item level (0.4–1.8%) and pairwise deletion was used in the analysis. Factor extraction was based on three criteria: scree plot, eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1, and factor interpretability based on the content of the items. Next, multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) was performed to investigate the model fit across countries by testing measurement invariance. Factor scores were used for the subsequent analyses. Cohen's *d* was used as an effect size measure with $0.30 < d > 0.50$ indicating small effects, $0.50 < d > 0.70$ medium-sized effects and $d > 0.70$ large effects (Cohen 1992).

Next, multigroup path analyses were conducted to investigate the associations of teacher and classroom characteristics with the teacher–parent relations using Mplus (Muthén and Muthén 2017). Missing data in the independent variables, ranging from (7–18%) was dealt with using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation in Mplus. A model was established in which all paths were constrained to be equal across countries. In case of unfavourable model fit, paths were freed based on the modification indices provided by Mplus. Lastly, the model was trimmed by eliminating nonsignificant paths with $p > .10$ and $|\beta| < .05$ in a step-by-step fashion to obtain the most parsimonious model (Wuensch 2016). Model fit was evaluated with several fit indices: the ratio of the Chi-Square and the degrees of freedom (Chi-Square/df), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), with Chi-Square/df < 3, CFI > .90, and RMSEA < .08, indicating acceptable to good fit. The Chi-Square/df ratio was used as an indicator of model fit rather than the Chi-Square test, because the latter is rather sensitive to small violations of the multi-normality assumption with large samples (Kline 2005). Improvement of the model fit was evaluated by testing the significance of the change in Chi-Square relative to the change in degrees of freedom.

Table 2. Oblimin-rotated structure matrix for the four-factor model.

	Factor				Commonalities
	1	2	3	4	
I feel that parents understand me	.61	-.10	.34	-.29	.46
I have trouble communicating with some parents	-.34	-.12	.14	.61	.50
I have similar beliefs as the parents about the children's behavior	.81	-.34	-.12	-.09	.66
I have similar beliefs as the parents about what the children can achieve	.82	-.07	.12	-.07	.68
Parents communicate with me only when there is a problem	-.06	.26	-.05	.75	.60
I tell parents that as a professional I know what is best for a child	.00	.74	.03	.35	.62
I welcome parents' initiative in contacting me	.24	.03	.57	-.16	.37
I mostly talk to parents when there is a problem	-.05	.15	-.06	.76	.60
Parents should not participate in decision-making regarding my work with children	-.22	.68	-.15	.15	.51
As a professional I am responsible for making contact with parents	-.04	.10	.76	.14	.65
I make an effort to have informal talks with all parents	.23	-.31	.68	-.02	.54
The main responsibility for a child's development and learning lies with the professional	.06	.62	.02	-.02	.40

Note. Factor loadings greater than 0.5 are in bold.

Results

Descriptives are presented in Table 1. There were some country differences in the diversity in the context teachers worked in, as teachers from Greece and Poland reported the least diversity, around 25%, which is in line with the targeted groups in these countries. For the other countries, the diversity was around 50%, referring to ethnic minority and low SES families.

The nature of teacher–parent relationships

First, we explored the nature of teacher–parent relations, starting with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which distinguished four factors accounting for 54.9% of the total variance (19.9%, 14.4%, 11.4% and 9.1%). Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(66) = 644.7$, $p < 0.001$) and the KMO value (0.67) confirmed the suitability of factor analysis (Hair et al. 2006). Communalities express the proportion of variance extracted by these four factors. Based on the criterion of standardized factor loadings greater than 0.40 and considering the content of the items, the four factors were labelled: Shared Beliefs, Reciprocal Relation, Hierarchical Relation and Problem-Oriented Contact. Table 2 presents the items, factor loadings and the communalities for the extracted factors.

The first factor, Shared beliefs, captures the view that teachers and parents have similar beliefs and expectations regarding children's behaviour and achievement, and that teachers feel that parents understand them. Second, Reciprocal relations reflect the responsibility and effort from teachers in establishing contact with parents as well as welcoming the parents to contact them. Third, Hierarchical relations refer to views that teachers are the ones who know what is best for children and take the main responsibility for children's learning, while feeling that parents should not interfere with decision-making. Fourth, Problem-oriented contact, reflects that both teachers and parents only communicate with each other when there is a problem.

Next, we evaluated the comparability and applicability of these four aspects of teacher–parent relations across the six countries. Multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (CFA's) were conducted to test the measurement invariance across countries, resulting in full or partial measurement invariance for all factors. For Shared beliefs, the model with all paths constrained to be equal across countries showed good model fit ($\chi^2(20) = 25.89$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.29$, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.95) (full measurement invariance). For Reciprocal Relation, the fully constrained model showed poor model fit ($\chi^2(20) = 162.31$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 8.12$, RMSEA = 0.31, CFI = 0.00). Based on the modification indices, five means were freed (one in England, two in Poland, one in Greece and one in the Netherlands), while all factor loadings were constrained to be equal resulting in a better model fit ($\chi^2(15) = 24.48$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.63$, RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = 0.86) (partial measurement invariance). No other modification indices were provided by Mplus, thus further improvement of the model was not possible. For Hierarchical Relation the initial model fit was not yet satisfactory ($\chi^2(20) = 43.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.17$, RMSEA = 0.13, CFI = 0.55), thus based on the modification indices two means were freed for Greece and Italy resulting in a good model fit ($\chi^2(18) = 19.44$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.08$, RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.97) (partial measurement invariance). Lastly, the fully constrained model for Problem-Oriented Contact showed poor model fit ($\chi^2(20) = 79.21$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.96$, RMSEA = 0.20, CFI = 0.00). After freeing four means (in

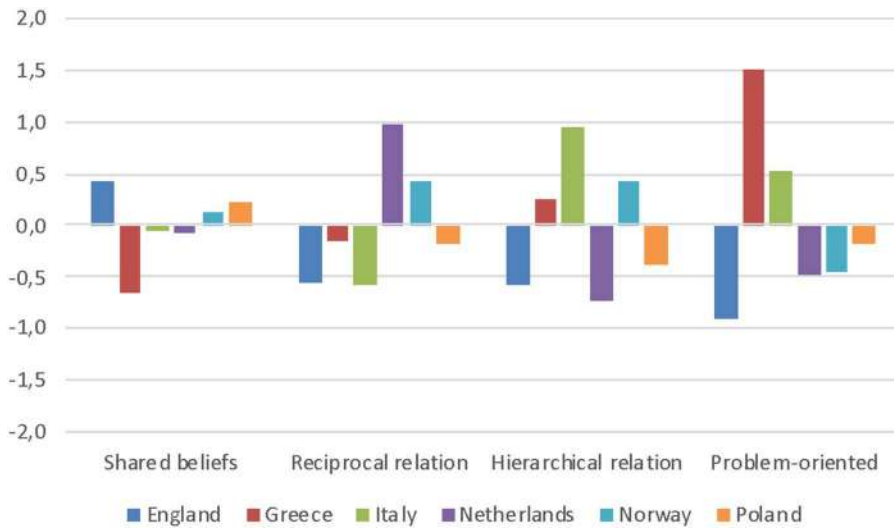


Figure 1. Standardized country scores for the four aspects of teacher–parent relations.

England, Greece, Italy, and Norway) and one covariance (in Greece) the model fit is good ($\chi^2(15) = 16.10, p < 0.001, \chi^2/df = 1.07, RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.98$) (partial measurement invariance). All four factor scores were saved and then standardized (with a mean of 10 and standard deviation of 2) and used in subsequent analyses.

Partial or full measurement invariance was established for all scales, revealing that the construct shares the same underlying factor structure across countries. However, there appeared different patterns of these four constructs across countries, showing nuanced differences in relating to parents. Figure 1 presents the findings based on standardized scores. This descriptive figure is indicative of profiles of teacher–parent relations within countries and serves merely as an illustration. Future research, with larger samples, should more solidly test country differences.

Associations between teacher and classroom characteristics and relations with parents

Firstly, correlations between the variables of interest were examined (see Table 3) showing significant intercorrelations between the four teacher–parent constructs in the

Table 3. Pearson correlation between teacher and contextual characteristics and teacher–parent relationships.

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Work experience	0.16**	0.01	-0.07	0.10*	0.15**	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.12*
2. Cultural self-efficacy		0.42**	0.07	0.41**	0.13**	0.01	-0.01	-0.12*	0.27**
3. Culturally sensitive practices			0.01	0.39**	0.01	0.18**	-0.08	-0.24**	0.11*
4. Education				-0.11*	0.31**	-0.10	-0.06	-0.02	0.07
5. Diversity in organization					-0.04	-0.09	-0.01	-0.28**	0.10*
6. Type of setting						-0.05	0.27**	0.09	-0.10*
7. Shared Beliefs							-0.15**	-0.21**	0.16**
8. Hierarchical Relation								0.35**	-0.19**
9. Problem-Oriented Contact									-0.13**
10. Reciprocal Relation									

* $p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.$

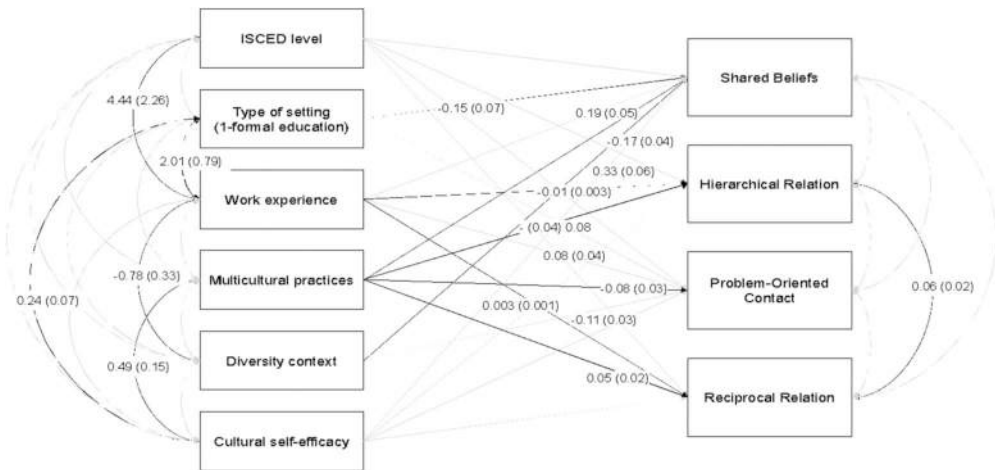


Figure 2. Final path model of teacher and classroom factors shaping teacher–parent relations with black lines for significant paths and grey lines for insignificant, constrained paths.

expected direction. In addition, some teacher and contextual aspects were correlated with teacher–parent relations. Teachers’ self-efficacy and culturally sensitive practices showed the most consistent associations, whereas the teachers’ education level was unrelated to their relations with parents.

Next, we investigated all teacher and contextual characteristics simultaneously for all countries. A multivariate, multigroup path analysis was conducted with all paths constrained to be equal across groups for the four aspects of teacher–parent relations in the same model. The model fit of this initial model was unsatisfactory ($\chi^2(120) = 217.90$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.82$, RMSEA = 0.10, CFI = 0.64). To improve model fit, the modification indices were used to free paths for specific countries, resulting in two freed paths for England and two for the Netherlands, which will be addressed below. In addition, nonsignificant paths ($p < .10$ and $\beta < .10$) were set to 0 to achieve a more parsimonious model. The final model showed significant improvement ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 41.60$, $p < 0.001$) and acceptable model fit ($\chi^2(126) = 176.30$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.40$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.81). The final model is presented in Figure 2.

Overall, the adoption of culturally sensitive practices was consistently related to the teacher–parent relationship in a positive direction for shared beliefs and reciprocal relations and in a negative direction for hierarchical relations and problem-oriented contact. All associations were small to medium (with β ranging from .04 - .29) with the smallest effect size for hierarchical teacher–parent relations. Further, significant differences between ECE and primary school teachers were found. Teachers working in primary school reported lower levels of shared beliefs, more hierarchy and less reciprocity in the relationship with parents, but no differences were found for problem-oriented contact. Also, higher levels of diversity in the organization were associated with less shared beliefs and more hierarchical relations (with β ranging from .03 to .31), though associations with problem-oriented contact and reciprocity in the relation were not significant. More diversity in the context showed the strongest relations with shared beliefs as compared to hierarchical relations. In

addition, less experienced teachers revealed stronger hierarchical relations (with β ranging from $-.15$ to $-.33$) but work experience was unrelated to the other three aspects. Lastly, the results showed that teachers' education level and teachers' sense of self-efficacy in dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity were unrelated to the four aspects of teachers' relations with parents.

Discussion

This study first explored the nature of ECE and primary schoolteachers' relationship with socioeconomically and/or ethnically diverse parents from a cross-country comparative perspective in England, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland. These countries reflect different traditions in the way (early) education is shaped and varying policies towards parents, diversity and inclusion. It is within these contexts that teachers need to build and maintain relations with parents of diverse backgrounds. Moreover, we studied how teacher and contextual characteristics contribute to this relationship and whether there were differences between ECE and primary schoolteachers.

The exploration of teacher–parent relations confirmed its multidimensional nature, which was mostly in line with the proposed continuum of positive and negative attributes in prior research (Ellis, Lock, and Lummis 2015; Harpaz and Grinshtain 2020). The results showed two positive, shared beliefs and reciprocal relations, and two negative, hierarchical relations and problem-oriented relations, attributes along this continuum. These were only partly interrelated, thus reflecting distinct aspects of teacher–parent relations. Teachers who experienced more shared understanding with parents showed more reciprocity and less hierarchy in this relation, and less orientation on problems. Teachers' more hierarchical relations were characterized by a stronger problem-based orientation, meaning they mainly had contact with parents in case of problems. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate a multidimensional concept of teacher–parent relations in a sample of several European countries with different policy contexts. The finding that the multidimensional concept is applicable in six European countries highlights the ecological validity while revealing differential country patterns of teacher–parent relations.

Secondly, our findings revealed two consistent factors contributing to teacher–parent relationships. The first concerned teachers' culturally sensitive practices, which showed to be positively related to their sense of shared beliefs with parents and reciprocity in their relationship and negatively associated with hierarchical and more problem-oriented relations. Thus, teachers who reported more cultural awareness and related practice appeared to have more positive, reciprocal relations based on a shared understanding. Despite country differences in immigration history and policies, schooling systems and curricular approaches, these day-to-day implementation of culturally sensitive classroom practices proved to be positive for establishing and maintaining positive relations with parents across all countries.

The second factor relates to the type of setting teachers worked in. Primary schoolteachers reported lower levels of shared beliefs, more hierarchical and less reciprocal relations than ECE teachers. Although the results showed that primary schoolteachers were higher educated than ECE teachers, education level was unrelated to teachers' relations with parents. Previous research has shown that parental involvement tends to

be the highest in early years (Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye 2000; Dearing et al. 2006), which mirrors the current findings regarding teachers' ways of establishing a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual understanding. Other researchers have attributed the decrease in parents' involvement in primary school, among others, to parents feeling less welcome in the school context or getting fewer teacher invitations (, Bakker and Denessen 2007; Bouffard and Weiss 2008; Daniel 2016). Hence, in view of aligning children's micro-contexts and strengthening the mesosystem, it seems essential that schoolteachers are bridging these contexts by establishing contact about children's experiences for mutual and reciprocal relations.

Overall, the results indicated few associations between teachers' background characteristics and the relationship with parents. More experienced teachers showed stronger reciprocal relations rather than hierarchical relations, indicating that teachers develop their competences during their career (Grosemans et al. 2015). Notwithstanding the role of other individual teacher characteristics not measured in the current study, such as personality traits, the implications for improving practice are more likely to be derived from changes in the context.

Increasing evidence underscores the importance of a comprehensive policy framework to address equity and inclusion, including building strong partnerships with parents in the context of diversity (OECD 2023). Despite some evidence of national policies or curricula focusing on parent relations and/or equity in the currently included countries, differences in implemented practices were evident. Along with emerging evidence illustrating that strong local network management can be an important lever for quality (Van de Kuilen 2023), this calls for ECE centres and schools to develop local policies that can support teachers in developing a shared understanding of building and maintaining partnerships with parents in diverse contexts. Despite country-specific differences, the findings highlight the importance of regular, informal communication with parents focused on children's overall development and progress, such as through (e)portfolios, rather than limiting contact to behavioural or academic issues, which can discourage and alienate families. Policies within ECE and school settings can support these exchanges by allocating time for communication and creating frameworks that foster culturally responsive partnerships, leveraging new technologies and innovative practices (Beaumont-Bates 2017; Kim 2009). They can refer to the role and expectations of parents, to the general language policy or the arrangements considering specific needs and restrictions concerning food or religious customs (Slot et al. 2018). These policies are not a guarantee for better relations with parents but reflect the organization's vision, which can support teachers in implementing more culturally sensitive practices.

Teachers' reported practices towards diversity and inclusion appeared related to a better shared understanding and more reciprocity in the relations with parents. This is in line with the acknowledgement that intercultural pedagogy is vital in addressing increasing diversity in society, especially in education (Vassallo 2014). The notion of culturally responsive partnerships may differentiate from building partnerships with mainstream parents. Indeed, another study using partly the same teacher data as the current study but complemented with parent data showed that both inclusive school policies and classroom practices (as reported by professionals) were positively associated with parents' views on the relationships with teachers and their satisfaction of living in the country (Romijn 2021).

Lastly, the importance of teachers' classroom practices warrants consideration on how to improve their intercultural competences, both in pre-service education and in professional development initiatives (Daniel 2011; Romijn, Slot, and Leseman 2021). Some key issues in developing intercultural competences in family-school relationships include the need to focus on teachers' implicit and explicit belief systems, supporting critical reflection on these beliefs, and providing ample opportunities for enactment in daily practice (Romijn, Slot, and Leseman 2021).

Limitations

The current findings should be read with caution due to some limitations. Firstly, the study investigated the teacher-parent relations from the teachers' perspective using self-reports. We cannot rule out that this may have resulted in biases regarding the way participants responded. Additional measures, such as parent reports, are recommended in future studies. However, another study being part of the same larger project investigating the teacher-parent relationship from the parent's perspective, lends support to one of the current study's outcomes, namely the importance of culturally sensitive classroom practices in establishing positive relations with parents (Romijn 2021). Also, other studies showed important congruence between teachers and parents' reports on their relationship (see Minke et al. 2014; Petrogiannis and Penderi 2014), while relations with children's development were reported only for teachers' ratings (Minke et al. 2014), highlighting the accuracy and importance of teachers' contributions. Another limitation concerns the scale reciprocal relations that showed less good model fit in the measurement invariance testing. Perhaps some of the items were ambiguous or some nuance was lost in the translation process. Note, however, that most items and scales worked well in the six countries despite differences in population, immigration history and policies, and educational contexts. Overall, this supports the robustness of the measurement and conceptualization of teacher-parent relations. Finally, the sample sizes per country were relatively small and not necessarily representative of the countries. Despite these limitations, this study revealed interesting insights into the complexity of teacher-parent relationships and its determinants.

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