



## A Qualitative Case Study on the Perceptions of Early Childhood Educators on Parental Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings

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### **Abstract**

Parents' participation in their children's education are issues that have been of concern to educational research over time. So are the dimensions of communication and cooperation that develop between the educational organization and the child's family. Nowadays, the majority of young children are enrolled in a variety of early childhood education and care settings, such as day care centers. Parental participation in these programmes is recognised as an important indicator for the provision of quality services. It is considered that it improves the quality of the structures, the upbringing of children and the learning environment at home overall. Research suggest that high quality early childhood education and care settings has a positive impact on the child's development and attitude towards learning, both in a short and a long term basis. In this paper we explore a single case study of an early years educator through a semi-structured interview. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of how an early childhood educator of 0-4 years old views and experience parental involvement in the nursery setting. The findings of this study provide strong evidence that early childhood educator's attitudes and perceptions towards parental involvement are positive. The early childhood educator's belief is that a meaningful relationship and collaboration with parents and the early childhood center is important in order to encourage parents to participate in the nursery's daily routine. Although they acknowledge that there are barriers that hinder parental participation, they make efforts to overcome the barriers. The necessity of this study is supported by the gaps identified in the review of international and Greek research activity regarding its topic and its usefulness in early childhood education and care, as it provides valuable insights into the type and quality of parental involvement in early childhood and the practices that early childhood educators can enhance.

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education; Parental Involvement; Qualitative Case Study*

## ***Introduction***

The participation of parents in their children's education, as well as the quality of the relationship that develops between the educational organisation and the family, are issues that seem to have attracted strong scientific and research interest over time. In the past, young children did not usually participate in educational programmes in early childhood education and care centres, but rather spent their early childhood interacting mainly with their family and close environment (OECD, 2012a). In recent decades, however, as OECD (2012a) points out, this condition has diversified. Compared to earlier times both the amount of time children spend in their immediate environment and the type of interactions they develop with it differ, for reasons related to changes in family structure, mothers entering the workforce and increasing migration (OECD, 2012a). Also, according to Sakellariou and Rentzou (2009), the recognition of the contribution of early childhood education and training has contributed significantly to this change.

Therefore, it is considered necessary to ensure a smooth transition and continuation of young children's experiences in different educational environments beyond the family circle (OECD, 2012a). These goals are achieved when parents and staff in early childhood education and care centres regularly exchange information and jointly adopt consistent approaches to young children's socialisation, daily routines, development and learning. In this way, the quality of the nursery centres themselves, the upbringing of children and the learning environment at home are improved (OECD, 2012a).

In this context, this case study attempts to examine and develop an in-depth understanding of how an early childhood educator of 0-4 year olds view and experience parental involvement in nursery education and care programmes. The research topic was chosen primarily for reasons of the researchers' personal research interest, as the researcher has been systematically involved in early childhood education and care for more than 25 years.

Therefore, it is important to investigate this topic because parental participation in the respective programmes is recognised as a significant factor in providing quality early childhood education, care and education (OECD, 2012a). The provision of quality services in this area, as OECD (2012b) points out, can bring a wide range of benefits not only for children, but also for parents and, in the long term, for society.

Furthermore, in recent years there has been a growing tendency to explore both policies and practices related to parental involvement in their child's early childhood programmes, as early childhood is recognised to be a critical developmental stage (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2013). It is also associated with academic success and the child's all-round development (Cosso, von Suchodoletz & Yoshikawa (2022); Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen 2018; Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou et. al., 2017).

In addition, the necessity of the present study is supported by the gaps identified in the review of international and Greek research activity regarding its topic. Considering the above, we believe that by examining and understanding in depth the attitudes and perceptions of the case study, we will draw useful conclusions about the type and quality of parental involvement in early childhood and how early childhood education, care and education providers can enhance it.

## ***Literature Review***

Parental involvement, as Sheridan et al (2020) denote, is a multi-dimensional concept. They point out that it can encompass the many ways that parents are involved in their children's learning, including practices of providing stimuli at home, (e.g. reading books together with the child), participating in school activities, (e.g. volunteering and school celebrations), sharing information and communicating with

educators (e.g. texting), and building positive relationships and partnerships with educators (e.g. making joint decisions about learning. Bower and Griffin (2011), similarly highlight the disagreements between theorists in order to find a commonly agreed definition, while Rentzou and Ekine (2017), argue that in the literature one finds a plethora of terms for parental involvement, which are used interchangeably, such as: "parental involvement", "parental engagement", and "parental collaboration".

Hakyemez-Paul et al. (2018a), regards that parental involvement, in general, is characterized by the development of a healthy relationship between the family and the education and care centre. They refer to parents' involvement in their children's education or school-family collaboration for children's learning. They argue that the different interpretations of the concept are due to the fact that both parents and educators are likely to perceive it differently. For example, parents may believe that having their children safe and bringing them into contact with school constitutes parental involvement, while educators may only take into account the active presence of parents in the school life.

The OECD (2012a), argues that parental involvement in early childhood refers to the formal and informal relationships that develop between parents and staff in early education and care settings. Indeed, this involvement can take various forms and interpretations, depending on the stage of the child's education to which it refers (e.g. early childhood education and care or early childhood education) and the perspective taken into account (e.g. early years, educator, parent, researcher) (OECD, 2012a).

In this study, we draw on findings from research on parental involvement with all possible interpretations found in the literature. We also clarify that by the term 'parent/parental involvement', we refer to those who exercise parental care (i.e., are responsible for the welfare, upbringing and education of a child, whether or not they are natural parents, married or not, and specifically to the mother and father and not to other members of the extended family). As found in the literature review, one of the well-known and widely used theoretical models, with the most influential on the issue of parental involvement, is the one proposed by Epstein (1995) (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Hakyemez-Paul et al, 2018 a&b; Lang Tolbert, Schoppe-Sullivan & Bonomi, 2016; Pentteri & Petrogiannis, 2013; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017; Tekin, 2011 etc.). /Epstein's (1995) model was adopted for early childhood education, training and care by the OECD in 2012, as presented below.

<b>Table 1: Epstein's model of the six types of constructive parental involvement and partnership (OECD, 2012a, p.1)</b>	
<b>Child-focused</b>	
<i>Communicating</i>	Design effective forms of centre-to-home and home-to-centre communications about programmes and children's progress.
<i>Parenting</i>	Help all families establish home environments to support children as learners (e.g., parenting classes).
<i>Stimulating development at home</i>	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with stimulating children's development and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.
<b>Centre-orientated</b>	
<i>Volunteering</i>	Recruit and organise parent/communities help and support (e.g., helping to plan and run centre events and fundraising activities, accompanying trips, donating their time to improve facilities, or assisting in the centre and sharing their skills and expertise).
<i>Decision making</i>	Include parents/communities in centre decisions, develop parent councils and parent-staff organisations.
<i>Collaborating with community</i>	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen programmes, family practices and children's learning and development.

The present study, focuses on five of the six types of Epstein's theoretical model (communication, parenting, home learning, volunteering, decision-making participation), as it is comprehensive and presents in a distinct and clear way the role of teachers and educational institutions in enhancing parental involvement (Tekin, 2011). From the literature review, research relevant to the topic of this study focuses on exploring the perceptions of early childhood educators, early childhood teachers (kindergarten teachers), and parents. We also drew on data from related research on primary school.

Starting from the Greek context, we cite the research of Sakellariou and Rentzou (2009) which finds that parent-teacher early childhood teacher communication is mainly informal and verbal during the arrival and departure of children at the nursery, while there is limited use of written communication. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that although preschool teachers in Greece value the role of parents in their children's education, they are reluctant to involve parents in their pedagogical work. Rentzou and Ekine (2017) include similar research results in their study.

In the same vein, Rentzou (2011), concludes, among other things, that educators are not satisfied with the quality of their communication with parents and that it is mainly superficial, as conversations between them tend to be short, infrequent and not meaningful, even though parents are willing to participate in the pedagogical and educational environment of their children (nursery and kindergarten/preschool). Moreover, the research shows that they do not develop friendly relationships with parents, although they are considered extremely important to enhance parental involvement. At the same time, Stamatis and Krasopoulou (2012), in their research on kindergarten-family communication, emphasize that communication and cooperation between kindergarten teachers and parents is not constant and regular, and that parental participation in classroom activities is minimal, although they also point out the willingness of parents to participate in kindergarten educational programs. In fact, they report that this is mainly exhausted during school holidays, in providing information about the child and in dealing with problems of child behaviour in the classroom.

Similarly, Penteri & Petrogiannis (2013) & Petrogiannis & Penteri (2014), argue that parents' and teachers' perceptions of parental involvement are positive. However, they also find that parental involvement, mainly refers to parents' participation in predetermined meetings with teachers and is mainly limited to school activities, such as attending school events (Penteri & Petrogiannis, 2013).

International research evidence, on the other hand, supports that early childhood educators have positive attitudes towards parental involvement and generally have good communication and cooperation with parents. Almendingen, Clayton and Matthews (2022) from their study in Australia, report that most parents are satisfied as educators are responsive to issues of concern, such as behaviour, toilet training and their child's social development. They conclude that early childhood educators are satisfied with their interactions with parents. Similarly, Hakyemez-Paul et al. (2018a) claim that early childhood educators have positive attitudes towards parental involvement in general and in its various forms, while Lang et al. (2016), having examined ten educator-parent relationships, note that their study finds strong evidence of positive communication between educators and parents particularly on parenting issues. In the same line, Hornby and Blackwell's (2018) case study of eleven primary schools in the UK shows strong evidence that the attitudes of the education community towards parental involvement are mostly positive. On the other hand, however, Keyser (2017), referring to early childhood educators, states that there are few who have ultimately succeeded in developing strong relationships with children's families, as most are more keen to work with children than with adults. Research findings also highlight the issue of good practices that enhance parental involvement. Cosso et al. (2022), verifying the usefulness of parental involvement for children's academic success, including practices like coaching parents to be able to support children's learning at home and in informal learning environments; encouraging conversations with their child about their experiences at school. In addition, they attach particular importance to strengthening communication and the school's connection with the family. Bower and Griffin (2011), based on Epstein's model,

described the various facets of parental involvement. They focus on volunteering, extending learning at home, attending school events, and informal daily as well as planned formal communication between parents and teachers. Daily face-to-face informal communication seems to satisfy parents as a way of enhancing cooperation between them and in the study by Milosavljević Đukić et al. (2022).

In a similar study, Liang et al. (2020) mention other practices such as parental participation in the school council, the use of digital technology for communication, and the daily exchange of information about the child's progress and experiences at school. However, in this survey, mothers appear dissatisfied about information sharing, as they feel that this communication is not two-way, because they mainly listen to what teachers have to report to them. This finding differs to the findings by Lang et al. (2016) where they enrich the strategies of good communication with parents by using email, written communication and daily notes. Hornby (2011) adds telephone communication and home visits by teachers, whereas Keyser (2017), confirms the above parental involvement practices and also gives weight to non-linguistic communication and the use of understandable language as a factor in improving communication. Furthermore, regarding the use of new technologies, she considers that they greatly facilitate communication and, by extension, parental involvement. Indeed, she cites research data from America, according to which the majority of the population owns a smartphone. In addition, she states that young parents are even more familiar with the use of technology and are more familiar with the use of the Internet (Keyser, 2017).

The barriers that hinder the effective participation of parents in education, training and care programmes were also sought in this literature review. Hornby and Lafaele (2011), propose a model that includes all possible factors that may hinder parental involvement. Such barriers can be individual barriers of parents and families, child-related barriers, barriers related to the relationship and communication between parent and teacher, and finally socio-economic barriers. It is worth noting, that subsequent research by Hornby and Blackwell (2018), showed that the above barriers remain significant, however it concludes that as, schools develop wider roles in supporting parents, this is an encouraging sign that suggests an improvement in parental involvement, in education.

From the review of Greek and international literature, it was found that although the importance of parental involvement in the early childhood education and care programmes that take place during early childhood is recognised (OECD, 2012; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017), few studies were identified that explore the attitudes and perceptions of early childhood educators of 0-4 year olds. Relevant research mainly focuses on kindergarten teachers, higher level teachers, parents and more broadly on school-family relationships. Moreover, in Greece, as Rentzou and Ekine (2017) point out, although there are official educational policy documents that describe in detail the ways in which parents can participate in kindergarten, there is no similar framework for nursery schools.

### ***Research Method***

The qualitative research stance was chosen for the present study, as it focuses on "in-depth exploration and understanding of the subjective perceptions, beliefs and experiences of individuals in relation to the phenomenon under investigation, in order to ascertain deeper knowledge" (Avraamidou, 2013, p.1). This particular method enables us to get to know the individual aspects of the topic and specially to study the "meaning-in-action" (Vrasidas, 2014, p.27) of the phenomenon under study, i.e. the participation of parents in the education and care programmes of the nursery, from the particular point of view, which is approached by the early childhood educator of 0-4 years old participating in the study.

The qualitative research model used to conduct the research is a case study. As a research approach, the case study in the literature, emerges as the most appropriate compared to other approaches, because it provides breadth and depth of information that allows for a thorough and holistic understanding

of the phenomenon under study (Avraamidou, 2013). In this case study, we seek to understand and interpret what the research participant believes about parental involvement, i.e. what are her perceptions, opinions, experiences and feelings during her interaction with parents in the nursery environment and how these are reflected in the practices she follows. A semi-structured interview was used for the collection of data.

The list of interview questions was drafted by the researchers, taking into account the need to obtain sufficient data to answer the research question, with the aim of keeping the questions open and flexible and not to guide the interviewee indirectly or directly. Above all, it was of interest to the researchers that the questions be meaningful to the participant, relevant to her experiences and to the topic, and in accordance with ethical principles. Prior to conducting the interview, the researchers conducted a pilot study (Brasidas, 2014), with a teacher with sufficient research experience to provide feedback and improve the questions.

For a better understanding of the context of the present research, before presenting the data, we consider it necessary to briefly describe the existing institutional framework of pre-school education and education. In Greece, preschool education and training is not uniform. As stated in Eurydice Network (2022), children under the age of 4 can attend:

- Infant, nursery and childcare centres, mainly under the responsibility of the municipalities, which are under the Ministry of Interior.
- Corresponding private pre-school education and care facilities (profit and non-profit), as well as infant and/or childcare facilities for a few hours and integrated care nurseries, operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Depending on the age of the children they accommodate, according to Presidential Decree 99 (FEK 141, 2017), are divided into: a. Infant care centres for infants from 2 months to 2.5 years old, b. Infant Care Centres for infants from 2.5 years old up to the age of enrolment in kindergarten (4 years old) and c. Nursery Centres (accommodate infants and toddlers together in the same building). For children aged 4-6 years, pre-school education is offered in public and private kindergartens under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Kindergartens are part of primary education and attendance is compulsory for two years.

Kindergartens apply a national curriculum, unlike the Nursery Schools which do not apply a uniform curriculum. The daily programme of education and care for early childhood is determined by the *Model Regulation for the Operation of Municipal and Community Crèches and Nurseries* (FEK 497, 2002). However, both types of pre-school education and education structures have important similarities, especially in the infant sections, such as the organisation and configuration of the indoor and outdoor space and the orientation in the implementation of educational activity programmes taking into account modern theoretical approaches.

## The Participant and the Setting

The sample of the research, is a female in her mid 40s. She was chosen not only because she is an early childhood educator of 0-4 years old, but also because she has considerable professional experience in the field of early childhood education and training. The fact that she is a relatively familiar person to the researchers contributed to her selection as a research participant. In the researchers' judgement, she was able to provide sufficient information to answer the research question and help to understand the phenomenon under study. The participant holds a Bachelors in early childhood education and care and has also completed successfully her postgraduate studies. She has been working as an early childhood educator for over 14 years.

The setting is housed in a two-storey building with a courtyard. At the time that this study took place, there were 96 children aged between 6 months and 4 years registered. The setting was distributed as follows: 1 infant section with 14 children (6m-1 year old), 1 mixed infant section with 16 children (1-2 years old) and 1 large infant section with 18 children (2-2.5 years old) and 2 toddler sections accommodating 24 children (2.5-4 years old), each. The infant sections are staffed with 3 persons (1 nursery nurse and 2 nursery assistants), while the infant sections are staffed with 2 persons (1 nursery nurse and 1 nursery assistant). The educator who participated in the research is in charge of one of the two infant classes. The opening hours of this nursery were 7.00-16.00.

At this point, we would like to point out regarding the generalization of the results that the sample in qualitative research does not have to be representative, since the qualitative method does not seek to arrive at positivistic generalizations (Brasidas, 2014). However, because the findings are transferable to similar contexts (Brasidas, 2014), we considered it necessary to describe as extensively as possible both the characteristics of the case study and the specific features of the research context and, more broadly, the structure of early childhood education and learning in Greece.

## The Interview Process

The interview took place in the participant's office in the nursery, after all the children had left, in order to have the necessary privacy. Before the interview was conducted, for ethical and moral reasons, a telephone contact with the interviewee had been made a week earlier, in order to explain the purpose of the interview, to inform her of its duration (30 minutes) and, above all, to make it clear that anonymity, confidentiality and secrecy of her personal data and the content of the interview would be guaranteed. On the day of the interview, shortly before the start, the researchers tested the recording application on the smartphone to confirm the good functioning of the device and prepared the notebook for recording the notes. During the interview, the researchers sought to listen attentively, make eye contact with the participant, show interest in the answers and encourage the respondent to answer. At the same time, they kept short-coded written notes that mainly concerned non-verbal communication, interpretive notes in relation to the responses and general comments on the participant's response. The ethical dilemma for the researchers arose during the interview, as they themselves were well aware of the topic, but this should not influence the respondent's answers in any way. On this issue, the researchers tried to maintain a neutral attitude.

The interview concluded with thanks to the participant for her contribution to the study. It is also worth mentioning that in a subsequent telephone communication, the interviewee expressed her satisfaction because she felt comfortable in conducting the interview, and also for the type of questions she considered appropriate for the topic. Immediately after leaving the interview area, the researchers checked their notes for any omissions. No further additions were needed in their judgment. The following morning, the qualitative data processing began by transcribing the interview in chronological order. Multiple readings of the transcript were then carried out and comments from the researchers were added in code where deemed necessary. To ensure the reliability of the survey, the complete transcript, including the comments from the researchers, was emailed to the participant in order to inform and secure her consent for further analysis. The participant indicated that she did not wish to have her personal data reported, in addition to the municipality in which she works. The researchers fully complied with the participant's wishes for ethical and moral reasons.

The qualitative data analysis took place in two stages, according to Erickson's (1986) distinction, namely the "Inductive Stage" and the "Inductive Stage" (as cited in Brasidas, 2014, p.108). During the Inductive Stage, multiple readings of the transcript were conducted in order to understand the data. Then, the process of coding the responses was carried out as follows: The researchers digitally, on a copy of the transcript, marked a word or short phrase in the margin of the document as a code that summarized the

content of each response, or subsection of each response. Then, utilizing the codes, themes that were repeatedly presented in the data were identified. Thus thematic categories were created. To facilitate the identification of the resulting categories, the researchers underlined the specific section of each response with a different colour highlighting. After the completion the researchers took into account the themes that emerged from the transcript in conjunction with the handwritten notes, three claims were made, which are. Early childhood educators 0-4 years old believe that they have meaningful communication and collaboration with parents. 2. Early childhood educators 0-4 years of age believe that both they and the daycare encourage parental involvement in the daycare's education and care programs; and 3. Early childhood educators 0-4 years of age believe that there are factors that hinder parental participation in the nursery's education and care programmes. The above assertions, as Brasidas (2014) states, are propositions that constitute a form of generalisation within the data. At this point, the inductive stage of data analysis was completed.

During the deductive stage, the researchers sought to identify evidence in the survey data to support their claims or possibly refute them. To this end, they drew three tables (one for each claim), according to the template included in Brasidas (2014, p.110). In the first row of the table, the claim was listed as the title and in the two lower columns, the evidence that supports it and the evidence that refutes it. For this purpose, they drew three tables (one for each claim), according to the template included in Brasidas (2014, p.110). In the first row of the table, the claim was listed as the title and in the two lower columns, the evidence that supports it and the evidence that refutes it. In this way, the evidence from the data that either supported or refuted each of the claims made was gathered and recorded. At this point, the deductive stage of data analysis was completed. The detailed substantiation of the claims is described in the next section, which refers to the results of the study.

## **Results**

The results are based on the research question "What do early childhood educators, 0-4 years old, think about parental involvement in early childhood education and care programs at the daycare center?" The participant's responses to the survey included three main themes, which led to the formulation of three assertions. These themes are presented below, and the evidence from the qualitative data is presented to support and outweigh those that refute them.

### Meaningful Communication and Collaboration with Parents

The above theme generally follows from the whole range of qualitative data, linguistic and non-linguistic communication. The participant's responses combined with the tone and consistency of her voice, as well as her enthusiasm throughout the interview, support this assertion.

In particular, the above assertion is reinforced by the fact that the research participant's interactions with parents are daily and the exchange of information is not superficial, related only to meeting physical needs, but deeper, because it relates more generally to the child's quality of life inside and outside the nursery. As she says at the beginning of the interview:

*-Well, in terms of parents, I would say that it is direct and daily mainly to get information in terms of the children's daily life and what their daily life is like outside the nursery. Also, for if the parents want to let me know about something that I may not be aware of and to help me deal with a problem that may arise with the child.*

In addition, the research participant points out the willingness and positive attitude of parents to share information with early childhood educators 0-4 years old, about their child's daily life, but also about their child's healthy and all-round development, as shown in the following interview excerpt:



*-In general, in the preschool age, parents are willing to share various information with the educators in order to help their child both in the smooth development and adaptation of the child in the kindergarten and in their course throughout the year.*

Elsewhere again in the interview, she returns to emphasize that the majority of parents respond positively to her communication invitations by saying that:

*-Most parents are very positive.*

While, on the same issue, she strongly affirms to the researchers her positive belief in a subsequent response, combining verbal and non-verbal communication, shaking her head affirmatively to emphasize the positive involvement of parents, where she mentions:

*-Yes-yes, they are involved.*

In fact, the participant, at another point in the interview, fully clarifies the positive image she has gained of her communication and collaboration with parents and identifies the quality of her relationship with them, arguing that:

*-In general, I think there is a close relationship with parents and it is a cooperative and mutually understanding relationship in most cases and it can only be constructive because our main concern is the best that can happen for each child individually and for each family.*

#### Encouragement of Parental Involvement

The above statement is inferred because the interviewee describes, with evident satisfaction in a large part of the interview and with concrete examples of practices that she and the nursery have implemented, the various ways of communication and approach in order to enhance parental participation. These ways include various forms of communication, such as face-to-face, written, digital, etc. The following interview excerpts are particularly enlightening:

*-The most direct ways of communication are talking and contact when they come with their children. Many times there are also some notes that we send to parents, some informative notes if we want to inform them about an incident. If we can't see them because they may be busy themselves and sending their child to school with another relative, it will be done by phone.*

She adds:

*-We usually ask parents to have a little notebook in the children's bag and write in there if there's a problem with food, if we want a change to go in the bag. More of the procedural and day-to-day stuff. When there is something important and particularly urgent concerning the child's behavior and some difficulty, then the communication is definitely by phone, if not in person...- -And also if some children come with the school bus, then in this notebook we write down what they have eaten and what they have not eaten, so that the parents are aware of their nutrition throughout the day.*

Elsewhere, he makes specific reference to the use of digital technology:

*-But also, communication via email has evolved with whom we have recently had a communication of the style of a digital e-newspaper to keep them informed about the programs and activities of their children's class.*

Indeed, it seems that the effort to increase parental involvement has not been limited, even during the pandemic period:

*-While we tried in every way to be in contact with parents, even remotely and asynchronously, we found that it was as if the parents "closed themselves, in their shells" and did not feel this need to contact us on any issue they had that concerned their children....- Or we could, as during the pandemic, have a viber group for any clarifications or questions that parents might have. ...-The truth is that we had some concerns initially about the viber because I thought the use of the group would be abused, but in the end there was a very good balance and there were examples of nice, nice collaboration with parents.*

In general, as the data shows, both at an individual and collective level, there are ongoing efforts to open up channels of communication and overcome the barriers that arise:

*-With the group emailing for information about the daily routine of the nursery, it can have to do with the diet that is sent every week to the parents, so all parents know whether they come to the nursery or not, what the next week's diet will be. With updates on any visits from a specialist, a speech therapist, a pediatrician on site and also suggestions for parents with how they can work with us, like we had the bazaar. We had asked them how you were interested in getting involved, what activities you would be interested in doing with us and they had suggested themselves. So we try either by phone, email or in person to be open in communicating with parents to overcome any barrier and even those who are difficult to approach to soften a little bit during the year and open up.*

In addition to developing communication, the participant also refers to the ways in which parents are supported to continue their child's learning at home:

*-Often we inform parents about what activities their children like and, especially, there are children who tell us that I have never done this before, it's something I've never seen before or I like it and we usually inform parents if something catches the children's interest, for example a puzzle or a hoop exercise or an exercise outside in the yard. Many children are not as familiar with the schoolyard because they don't have many outdoor activities with parents. And a lot of times we also encourage parents to walk, to take their kids to parks, to go to the playground to practice their gross motor skills as well because there seems to be some difficulties there. For reading with their children, we often suggest which books to borrow from the classroom if they cannot buy them, or from local lending libraries, or some activity even outside the home, music and movement, for example, for the benefit of the children.*

Also, specific references are made with certainty, by the research participant, to the nursery's policy to enhance parental involvement:

*-We encourage cooperation with parents and over the years we have found that the more parents are involved in their children's learning process, the more receptive they are because they receive very positive messages from home as well...- Well, from time to time we have invited parents in the classroom, individual parents, to read a story with the children, whatever they want, to do a music and movement activity. We've had a slumber party. We had the parents and the kids come in their pajamas, we had a movie showing and we had popcorn and then we danced. It was in party form. On Christmas and Easter celebrations we always involve the parents with some activities.*

At the same time, it also brings out the volunteer dimension in parental involvement:

*-Recently parents had organized a book bazaar by themselves and all the proceeds were used for some equipment for the kindergarten. In general, we have a very active parents' association and generally the parents of our school are very positive about participating in activities and working with us.*

*In addition, the interviewee, having experienced good practices that have thrived in the past, expresses clear views with examples on how the nursery can promote parental involvement:*

*-I think at times some talks that had been done in the form of a parenting school were very helpful, because they gave parents the opportunity to come in on an afternoon when most of them would not have a job and have some experts talk about specific issues. Maybe it had to do with the children's diet, maybe it had to do with some sleep problems and you could see right away that the parents were softening up because they found that what was happening to their child was not only happening to them, but it was happening to other parents. They also came into contact with other parents, they got to know them better and some relationships were formed that were closer than just knowing the classroom teacher because they knew each other. And they would come and say, "Oh, I'm Maria's mom," "Oh, you're Maria's mom? My daughter is talking to me about your child." And so they would also give a face to the other child's parent and many times they would meet outside of school. I think parenting schools are a great way to improve and achieve cooperation between school and family.*

In addition, as can be inferred from the data that follows, the interviewee has a clear intention and strategy to enhance parental involvement:

*-As I mentioned earlier, through various forms of communication, parents find that we are partners and co-facilitators in this journey. I think my main concern at the beginning of the year is that parents trust me, that they get to know me initially and by extension trust me and in this way they do not feel any shyness in being able to discuss with me issues that are always about well-being, as the English say, the proper development and social adaptation of their children. What else could I say here? ... I think this. I am available to talk to them either in person or over the phone so that they feel that security and we can move forward and do the best we can for their child...- And I also let them know the ways in which I move around the classroom, what I expect from the children, what my goals are for the year. So, I think by giving access to that plan, parents can also know what the timeline is going to be for the year. Based on the age of the kids what we would like to see by the end of the year, what progression.*

As the following extract shows, the experience has played a key role in the development of the participant's strategies and her wider attitudes to parental involvement:

*- And as the years go by and I feel like I've found my footing in the classroom as well, I make various nudges and approaches to parents to participate in the day-to-day running of the nursery and to work with me and I don't have that anxiety and insecurity of opening up the classroom to parents. Yes, I believe that. That I do have an open classroom. I have the classroom door open for any parent who is interested in taking part in any classroom activity with the children in the classroom and with me...- Open the door, meaning that if a parent says to me I would like to read a story with the children or I would love to take part in a puppet show with you, we would say "I would love to" and we would look for a date that would be convenient and we would come in together. In fact, we have done so and have found that parents don't want to leave the classroom. So the half hour that we set as a time they exceed it and they want to stay much longer because they like to be in class with the children.*

However, the respondent does not rest, but tries to improve her practice, depending on the educational level of the parents, their temperament and their personal perceptions of her role:

*-I believe that the directness that you have with parents and not referring to them in scientific terms and not making parents feel that they are lacking in something by assuming that we are something more, ... not educated, but ... that there is not a common line of communication.... -I think one way would be ... maybe these difficult parents because I've heard that these hard to reach, hard to reach parents who are either busy or because of their level of education don't want direct contact with educators maybe by communicating my practices in a more simple way and by making myself available for a longer period of time, they would feel that they can at any time during the day contact me.*

### **Factors Hindering Parents' Participation**

The above assertion is substantiated by the participant's references to various barriers related to educational level, parents' temperament and practical difficulties that hinder parents' participation in the nursery's education and care programmes, as we will see in a moment:

*-The factors that I believe hinder the cooperation between childcare workers and parents are firstly the very busy schedule that some parents may have, who find it difficult or bring their children to the nursery too early or bring them too late and are not within the hours that I may work. Although usually the hours are rolling and we will see them at some point. Although I won't hide from you that there were years when we didn't see the parents at all and only saw the grandparents. So the parents' schedule is very important in terms of whether we can work with the parents or not because many don't have the time.....-... there are cases of parents that I find it difficult to communicate because I see that there is a distance. ... -... there is a common code of communication, but it is not always easy to do that. -...maybe those difficult parents because I have heard that those hard to reach, parents who are either busy or because of their level of education do not want direct contact with educators...-Also, the temperament of the parents. They are parents, few of course, who don't want much - much. They want this much, that much. Bringing their child ... Sometimes you also realize how receptive they are to communication and cooperation, because if you often hear the question "Everything's fine, huh?", it's a rhetorical question. That is, they have already given the answer and they are not expecting an answer from you, so they are, in fact, closing the door and not allowing you further communication.*

### **Discussion**

This qualitative research is a case study aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of an early childhood educator of 0-4 year olds, regarding parental involvement, in nursery education and care programmes. As already mentioned, this study does not seek positivist generalisations (Brasidas, 2014). However, the findings can be transferred to other similar contexts outside the context of this research (Brasidas, 2014).

Therefore, we argue that early childhood educators of 0-4 year olds perceive that they have meaningful communication and collaboration with children's parents. This finding is supported by other studies, such as Almendingen et al. (2022), who conclude that early childhood educators are satisfied with their interactions with parents, and Lang et al. (2016), who note that their study finds strong evidence of positive communication between educators and parents particularly, in matters of parenting. On the other hand, however, it seems that the above finding is not in line with other studies, such as Sakellariou and Rentzou (2009), Rentzou (2011), Stamatis and Krasopoulou (2012), Penteris and Petrogiannis (2013), which find that the communication of the early childhood teacher and the kindergarten teacher with

parents is short and mainly superficial and limited to predetermined formal meetings. Moreover, it also contradicts the observation of Keyser (2017), who highlights that there are few early childhood educators who have finally managed to develop meaningful and strong interactions with the families of young children. In addition, the qualitative data highlights the positive attitude of parents themselves as a parameter of good communication and cooperation between early childhood educators and parents. This finding is also found in other studies that conclude that parents respond willingly to the invitations for communication and cooperation of both early childhood educators 0-4 years old and kindergarten teachers (Lang et al, 2016; Milosavljević Đukić et al., 2022; Penderi & Petrogiannis, 2013; Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014; Stamatis & Krasopoulou, 2012; Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Adefunke, 2017).

The second important finding highlighted the strong belief of early educators that both they and the nursery encourage parental involvement in the nursery's education and care programmes. From the quotation of the survey results, a wide variety of methods of enhancing this participation, both on the part of the educators and on the part of the nursery, such as frequent formal, informal, face-to-face, telephone, written and digital communication, parental participation in classroom educational programmes, support for parents to continue the child's learning at home and in informal learning environments, promotion of volunteering, etc. The findings of the present study are supported by OECD (2012a) and other studies dealing with both early childhood education and education more broadly and primary education (Bower & Griffin, 2011-Cosso et al., 2022; Hornby, 2011; Keyser, 2017; Lang et al., 2016-Liang et al., 2020; Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2020). It should be noted, however, that the results of the present study are partially in line with Hornby (2011), i.e. only in terms of telephone communication, as no evidence was presented to confirm home visits. We also note the correspondence of the practices emerging from the qualitative data with Epstein's (1995), theoretical model of parental involvement, as adopted by the OECD (2012a), for early childhood. As already mentioned in the literature review, the examination of the results of this study focused on five of the six types of constructive parental involvement, namely communication, parenting, home learning, volunteering and participation in decision-making. It is worth noting, considering the results that strong evidence of agreement was detected for all types except for decision-making.

However, this finding contradicts with research results, which claim that preschool teachers and educators seek limited parental involvement in pedagogical work and parental involvement is evident only in school events (Penderi & Petrogiannis, 2013; Stamatis & Krasopoulou, 2012; Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Adefunke, 2017; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2009). In particular, it contradicts the findings of the latter regarding the limited use of written communication.

Regarding the third finding, which relates to the factors that constitute a barrier to parental involvement, the results highlight relative barriers related to difficulties in communication and cooperation between educators and parents, mainly due to the educational level and temperament of parents, but also due to practical factors, such as, for example, parents' working hours. The importance of the mentioned barriers is verified in the research of Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Hornby and Blackwell (2018). However, although the results of this study acknowledge the existing barriers, it also identifies the effort to overcome them. This finding appears to be supported by Hornby and Blackwell's (2018) research, which showed that although barriers remain, there is a change in the educational community's approach to addressing them.

In general, the findings of the present study demonstrate that early childhood educators of 0-4 years old have positive attitudes and perceptions towards parental involvement in early childhood education and care programmes because, as shown by the qualitative data, they believe that they have effective communication and cooperation with parents, that both they and the nursery encourage parental involvement and that, although they recognise that there are obstacles that tend to inhibit it, they try to overcome them. Studies reporting on early childhood educators have reached similar conclusions

(Almendingen et al., 2022; Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018; Lang et al, 2016). In addition, the results of the present study document evidence of compatibility with Epstein's (1995) theoretical model as adopted by OECD (2012a) for early childhood in four of the five types of constructive parental involvement studied, namely communication, parenting, home learning and volunteering minus parental involvement in decision-making. However, similar studies dealing with early childhood educators disagree with the above findings (Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Adefunke, 2017-Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2009).

Comparing the findings of the present study with previous research data for the Greek context (Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Adefunke, 2017-Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2009), we believe that significant progress has been made in the attitudes and perceptions of early childhood educators of 0-4 year olds regarding parental involvement in early childhood education and care programmes. This change is likely to lead to a further strengthening of parental involvement and, consequently, to an improvement in the quality of the education and care services provided by nursery schools.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

Early childhood is recognised as the most critical developmental period in a person's entire life (Sommer et al. 2013), and early childhood education is seen as particularly important at this age, as it forms the basis for children's future academic success and smooth development (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen 2018a-OECD 2012a&b; Rentzou, 2011-Rentzou & Ekine, 2017). In this context, parental involvement is seen as necessary for the provision of quality early childhood education, care and education (OECD, 2012a&b).

In general, the findings of the present study demonstrate that early childhood educators of 0-4 years old have positive attitudes and perceptions towards parental involvement in early childhood education and care programmes because, as shown by the qualitative data, they believe that they have effective communication and cooperation with parents, that both they and the nursery encourage parental involvement and that although they recognise that there are obstacles that tend to inhibit parental involvement, they try to overcome them.

Studies reporting on early childhood educators have reached similar conclusions (Almendingen et al., 2022; Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018; Lang et al, 2016). In addition, the results of the present study document evidence of compatibility with Epstein's (1995) theoretical model as adopted by OECD (2012a) for early childhood in four of the five types of constructive parental involvement studied, namely communication, parenting, home learning and volunteering minus parental involvement in decision-making. However, in the literature, similar studies dealing with early childhood educators disagree with the above findings (Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Adefunke, 2017-Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2009).

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However, despite the optimistic indications of this study, we consider it is necessary to establish a single framework for early childhood education and care, which includes clear objectives, guidelines and practices to promote parental involvement. In addition, as this research is a case study and its results are based on only one subject and one source (interview), we consider it beneficial to conduct the research with more childcare workers from different early childhood centres and to apply the triangulation method (Brasidas, 2014) to document the results.

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