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Kirsti Karila

## The Significance of Parent - Practitioner Interaction in Early Childhood Education

## Die Bedeutung der Eltern-ErzieherInnen-Interaktion in der Früherziehung

### **Abstract:**

The article will focus on the parent-practitioner interaction in the context of the educational conversations in a Finnish day care centre. The National Curriculum Guidelines in Finland seek to emphasise a new approach – referred to as early childhood education and care partnership – which involves participation that goes further than co-operation. The journey from co-operation to early childhood education and care partnership requires mutual, continuous and committed interaction in all matters concerning the child. The experience of being heard and mutual respect are essential for attaining shared understanding. In developing the partnership practices the conversations between the parents and the practitioners emerge as the key arenas. The task of the research described in the article was to discover how partnership is generated via the conversations between the parents and the practitioners. Special attention was paid to the issues discussed by the parents and the practitioners in the conversations; the course of the conversation; as well as to the roles the parents and the practitioners present in the conversations. The child-specific conversations (18) to be examined concerned the conversations between the parents of the 10 children and the day care professionals. The conversations took place in authentic co-operative situations.

### **Zusammenfassung:**

Der Artikel befasst sich mit der Eltern-ErzieherInnen-Interaktion im Rahmen der Erziehungsgespräche in einer finnischen Kindertagesstätte. In Finnland soll mit den National Curriculum Guidelines unter der Überschrift „Früherziehung und partnerschaftliche Betreuung“ ein neuer Ansatz eingeführt werden, der eine über die Kooperation hinausgehende Mitwirkung vorsieht. Der Weg von „Kooperation“ zu „Früherziehung und partnerschaftliche Betreuung“ erfordert eine kontinuierliche und engagierte beiderseitige Interaktion in allen das Kind betreffenden Fragen. Wesentlich für ein gemeinsames Verständnis ist die Erfahrung des aufeinander Hörens und einander Respektierens. Als zentraler Ort für die Entwicklung partnerschaftlicher Praktiken haben sich die Gespräche zwischen Eltern und ErzieherInnen erwiesen. Das hier vorgestellte Forschungsprojekt sollte klären, wie über die Gespräche zwischen Eltern und ErzieherInnen Partnerschaft aufgebaut wird. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit galt dabei den bei diesen Gesprächen diskutierten Fragen; dem Gesprächsverlauf; und den Rollen von Eltern und ErzieherInnen in den Gesprächen. An den zu untersuchenden kindbezogenen Gesprächen (18) waren die Eltern der 10 Kinder und die ErzieherInnen der Tagesstätte beteiligt. Die Gespräche fanden in realen Kooperationsituationen statt.

**Keywords:** Partnership, Early Childhood Education, Discourse Analysis, Educational Conversations

**Schlagworte:** Partnerschaft, Früherziehung, Diskursanalyse, Erziehungsgespräche

“Parent – caregiver communication, particularly concerning the behaviour and experiences of the child, is a means of linking the home and child-care contexts of the child's experience and enriching the caregivers' and parents' capacity to provide supportive and sensitive care of the child” (Owen, Ware & Barfoot 2000, p. 413). Thus, the caregiver-parent relationship has long been considered an important dimension in the ecology of day care children (Shpancer 2002).

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) and Powell (1989; 1997) have extensively studied and structured the theoretical foundations of the importance of the cooperation between the parents and the early years practitioners, particularly from the point of view of the child's cognitive and social development. Despite theoretical support and professional and popular acceptance of the importance of communication between parents and practitioners, there have been few empirical studies of the assumptions and practices regarding the co-operative relations between this aspect of parent–practitioner partnership and benefits for children. The research has focused more on the parents' general attitudes towards their child-care providers and the providers' general attitudes towards parents, but has rarely addressed the relationship between parent-practitioner dyads as 'partners' in the child's care (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000, p. 414.)

In this article, I will examine the operations of these dyads in the context of the educational conversations between the parents and the practitioners in the day care centre. The task of the research described in the article was to discover how partnership is generated via the conversations between parents and practitioners. The more specific research issues concerned the a) content of the conversations, the b) course of the conversation, as well as the c) roles parents and the practitioners play in the conversations.

## Parent-Practitioner Interaction in the Finnish Context

Due to the cultural nature of education, the ways education is organised varies between countries. For a long time, it has been typical of Finnish and other Nordic societies to have early childhood education divided between homes and public early childhood education settings. In Finland, the day care is the central form of public early childhood education. Two tasks have been defined for the Finnish day care in the legislation (Act on Children's Day Care 367/1973). They are 1) the comprehensive support for the development of the child, and 2) support for the parents in nurturing and educating their child.

However, as observed in the occupational practices of Finnish day cares, there has been an explicit emphasis towards working with the children, where supporting parents in nurturing and educating their child by promoting co-

operational/collaborative working methods have been relatively little developed (Karila & Nummenmaa 2001). This emphasis upon the child also emerges in that rather a large number of day care professionals consider the individual child as the target of their work, not, for example the child as a member of the family and the peer group (Karila, 2003). This emphasis is also made apparent by the lack of time allocated by the practitioner for individual families (See Lounassalo & Keskinen 2001, p. 242). A number of surveys conducted with day care professionals have, understandably, show that practitioners consider it difficult to co-operate with the parents and see deficiencies in their related professional competencies. After all, professional competencies usually develop in active working processes. If a sufficient number of working hours are not regularly allocated for working with parents, the professional competencies do not develop as required; nor are the benefits of such a partnership realised.

One reason for the situation is that the majority of training of day care professionals has emphasised working with children rather than working also with parents. This has begun to change during recent years, for example, the objectives of the kindergarten teacher training curricula have highlighted the importance of co-operation with parents (Karila, Kinos, Niiranen & Virtanen 2005). This objective has not, however, been reached in co-operation with teaching the necessary working methods (for example conversational practices), but emphasis has mostly been laid on general interactive skills and attitudinal skills to work with the parents. From this perspective the training has been limited in its offering of actual methods for enhancing the relationship between parents and practitioners.

During the past few years, the obligation set by the Act on Children's Day Care (367/1973) to support parents in nurturing and educating their child has been highlighted in the development of early childhood education in Finland by the national steering system (Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care 2003; National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2003). A number of reasons can be found for this emphasis: the economic and social difficulties of families with small children have somewhat increased, and at the same time, the authorities' concern for the weakening role of parenthood has increased. Some studies have shown that parents trust practitioners more than themselves when it comes to education. It has thus been interpreted that families need more support to become involved in their child's education. In addition, a more general attempt in the Finnish administrative culture towards listening to the 'customers' has, for its part, lead to the emphasis, in the educational sector, on co-operation with parents. There is an ongoing inclination to shift from a working culture, highlighting the power of expert authorities, towards a culture of participating and participation.

In early childhood education, the 'old' idea of supporting the education offered to children by their parents in the home has progressed further with the aid of the new approach to early childhood and care partnership. At document level, such an approach first appeared in the Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2003, p. 17; the English translation being 'educational partnership'). Also, the National Curriculum Guidelines seek to emphasise this new, more profound approach, which involves participation that goes further than co-operation. This means that the journey from co-operation to early childhood education and care partnership re-

quires mutual, continuous and committed interaction in all matters concerning the child. The experience of being heard and mutual respect are essential for attaining shared understanding (The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2003: pp. 3 & 29.) The concept of early childhood education and care partnership is new in the parlance of Finnish early childhood education, and its very meaning have recently been the subject of active discussion among day care professionals (Karila, 2003).

Implementing the early childhood education and care partnership on a day-to-day basis cannot be taken for granted. According to Keyes (2002, p. 177), several factors are related to this implementation. These factors include, the 'fit' between parental cares and concerns and those of the teachers, the degree of match between a teacher's and a parent's culture and values, the societal forces at work in the family and at school, and how parents and teachers view their roles.

## **Educational Conversations Are Key Arenas for Partnership**

The concept of an early childhood education and care partnership means a conscious commitment by parents and staff to collaboration for supporting children's growth, development and learning (The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2003, p. 29). It can be understood as a concept that defines the nature and also the quality of educational co-operation. Directing public attention towards the quality of the educational co-operation foregrounds the occupational practices and methods that are essential for the maintenance of this partnership, as a target for critical examination. Establishing an actual partnership culture in the working practices of day care centres is a demanding and time-consuming process. Namely, alongside the development of everyday working practices, the structuring of a partnership culture also calls for changes in the beliefs and mutual expectations of the day care professionals and the parents.

The conversations between the parents and the practitioners emerge as key arena to developing this partnership. Daily conversations, however, do not often provide an opportunity for deepening the partnership. Research carried out by Endsley and Minish (1991) followed 369 interactive communicative events between parents and staff during mornings and the afternoons. Most conversations comprised greetings and routine matters. In these conversational exchanges, information on the child's behaviour, health and the normal days both at home and at the day care were generally the content of the discussions. The data from Finnish day care centres provides to a large extent similar observations. The additional difficulty in these situations is that the practitioners need to divide their attention between individual children, the group of children, and the parents especially at the start and end of the day.

Implementing this partnership in early childhood education does require separately agreed meetings and conversations between the parents and the practitioners in order to ensure the careful attention to the child's development and education. Organizing these conversations has varied greatly in the Finnish day care

centres. Today, however, the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2003) recommends that a child-specific preschool education and early childhood education plan should do for each day care child together with the parents. This recommendation has increased the amount of meetings and conversations between parents and practitioners about the child's education plan. Developing the practitioners' professional competencies related to these meetings and conversations is one of the major challenges in the Finnish day cares.

## Research Tasks and Data Collection

The aim of this research was to discover how partnership is generated via the conversations between the parents and practitioners. The more specific research issues investigated concerned the content discussed during the conversations, the course of the conversation, as well as to the roles parents and the practitioners play in the observed conversations.

The conversation data to be introduced in the article is one part of the author's wider research project, implemented in a Finnish day care centre during the year of 2002 to 2003. Families using the services of the sample day care centre reflected the socioeconomic and cultural background of the population in a fairly large Finnish city. The research project focused on the very essence and development of the beliefs related to the partnership of the practitioners and parents, and the partnership practices in the centre.

The staff members of the centre participated in action research lasting one year. This part of the research project aimed to analyse and develop the partnership practices of the centre. Additionally, the partnership between the practitioners and the parents and its development, were monitored using various research methods, including observing the meetings between parent and practitioner, parent-practitioner interviews at the beginning and at the end of the year and recordings of the child-specific conversations between parents and practitioners during the year. In order to obtain a deeper insight into early childhood education and care partnership, the actual parent-practitioner interaction was examined from the viewpoint of five children of 1-2 years of age and five children of 5-6 years of age. The research is a qualitative multiple-case study.

The child-specific conversations to be examined included the conversations between the parents of the 10 children who participated in the above mentioned research project, and the teachers and nurses of the children. All the names found in the passages have been changed from the original for confidentiality. The conversations took place in authentic co-operative situations. According to the working practices of the day care centre, the parents could book a time for the conversations at the beginning and at the end of the day care year. The data collected consists of a total of 18 conversations, lasting between half an hour to one hour.

A total of 5 female practitioners, 4 fathers, and 10 mothers participated in the conversations. The duration of the parents' co-operation with the day care centre and experiences varied. Some parents had started their partnership at the beginning of the day care year, when their child had started the day care. One family, whose third child was starting school after this particular year, had the longest

experience of partnership – 12 years. Of the practitioners who participated in the conversations, two were kindergarten teachers and three were nurses. The amount of work experience varied considerably: one practitioner was in her first year of working in the day care centre, while the most experienced practitioner had 20 years of work experience.

One practitioner was present in each conversation. In some conversations, both parents participated, while in some others, either the mother or the father was present. In three of the cases (6-year-olds), the child of the parents involved participated in the early part of the conversation. This practice aimed to support the child's participation in their own early education.

All the conversations were recorded on an audio tape. In the first conversation, the researcher was present in the meeting as an observer. In this case, both the participating practitioner and the parent directly addressed the researcher, rather than each other. In all other conversations, the researcher was not present because gathering the data was based on the idea of authenticity. In the rest of the conversations, the practitioner and the parent spoke directly to each other and also controlled the recording.

## How Was the Data Analysed?

As there is relatively little previous research on the partnership generated via conversations between parents and practitioners there does not exist a well defined theory or theories on the subject. For this reason, it was logical that the analysis became data-based. However, not a purely inductive approach to the data was used, but rather an abductive one. The core principles concerning language and the use of language in discourse analysis formed a loose theoretical framework for my analysis.

According to Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen (1993, p. 17), discourse analysis cannot be described as a clearly-defined research method, but rather a loose theoretical frame of reference. Utilising discourse analysis in this research means recognising the fact that there exist parallel and competing systems of signification in the interactive speech of parents and day care professionals. The key starting points of discourse analysis include the functionality and contextuality of speech and language (Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen 1999). In this paper, functionality means that people act by using language, and are actors of their own type by virtue of their use of language. In the conversations (recorded and analysed) included in the data, this was indicated in the variety of ways both parents and practitioners interacted. Detecting the various forms of action was facilitated by the data triangulation available for the researcher in the wider research project. Functionality also means recognising the fact that the use of language has its consequences: what is being said and how it is said effects both the interpretations and action of the practitioners and the parents also in the future (See Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen 1993, p. 18; see also Potter & Wetherell 1987).

The contextuality of speech and language is the other key element of the discourse analysis. This means that significant action is considered to be bound to its context. In this case, the hierarchical positioning of the parents and the practitioners in the conversations takes place in the historical and cultural frame of the

educational co-operation in the Finnish day care. Furthermore, an individual conversational situation always forms its own context. In a situation, two or more different actors meet, and their way of acting and the world of meanings carried within them create a unique conversation. Despite this uniqueness, some more general characteristics that shed some light on the conversational situation and the significance of the actors present in itself could be detected in the data.

In the first phase of the analysis, the data was converted into plain text. The conversational texts were analysed paying attention to the following issues:

- What kinds of issues were discussed (thematics)?
- What was the course of conversation like (quantitative analyses on the participation in the conversation, qualitative content analysis on the nature of the address)?

After an overall picture of the entire dataset had been formed, it was explored in closer detail, from viewpoints significant for the research tasks; such as the content discussed, the meanings rendered on the topics by the participants and the ways in which the meanings were produced and how the meanings developed in the course of the conversation. The analysis was carried out by setting questions of this type to the data. At this stage, I ran a case-specific analysis of the data, treating each conversation as a case. With the aid of case-specific analysis, I formed a picture of a) the topics considered to be the key issues by the persons interacting in the conversation, b) each person's individual manner of participating in the conversation, and the c) situation emerging in each conversation as a result of the conversation partners. By comparing the cases (conversational situations), I started to form a more general picture of the educational conversations between parents and childcare professionals as arenas of educational partnership, crossing the boundaries of individual and case-specific variation. The passages/extracts from the conversations introduced in the article were selected to represent the variation included in the whole dataset.

## Results

### What is Discussed in the Educational Conversations and How?

The topics of conversations between parent and practitioner were linked to the everyday life of the child. The content of the discussions often included the child's behaviour, and current issues, both at home and in the day care centre. Additionally, both the parents and the practitioners described the child's daily environments and the various activities which the child was involved in. The parents also had the opportunity to present their wishes and worries regarding their child, the child's progress and the practices of the day care centre.

The way in which the child's action and development were discussed is interesting. In the conversations, children were defined by both parents and practitioners via their social and cultural contexts. Namely, both the parents and the practitioners described and interpreted the individual child's development in rela-

tion to the other children in his/her circle. The parents' frame of reference was formed by siblings as well as the other children in the family, such as cousins, whereas the practitioner tended to compare the individual child with other children in the day care group. The every day practices both at home and in the day care centre were the second interface used to evaluate and compare the child's action and development. From the perspective of home - day care partnership, the difference in these viewpoints is a key factor: the parents and the practitioners have differing insight upon which to draw conclusions regarding the individual child, as well as to convey to each other. The conversations present rather a versatile picture of the child and his or her action in various micro-environments. The conversations provided the opportunity to build on a conscious level a new image of the child, based on shared information. However, in none of the conversations observed or heard was this opportunity was seized. In most of the conversations one of the partners, either the parent or the practitioner, offered one piece of information and the other responded with a corresponding piece of information, but there was no attempt to compare or discuss the differences between the home and the day care to promote development of the child.

The child's own voice was minimal in the conversations. Even in the three conversations where the child was present, listening to the child's experiences remained mostly a formality. In these cases, the children were given the opportunity to share their experiences through drawings and other portfolio work. The level of the child's contribution was limited, for example, naming the objects or the persons in a drawing. The adults did not return to them in any way after the children exited the room.

### Varying Types of Conversation Are Formed in the Interplay of Different Actors

The conversations form a rich database that can be analysed in many ways. This study aims to investigate the nature of parent-practitioner interaction in the context of conversations. Therefore the analysis has concentrated on the course of conversations. Three different conversation types were found. Firstly, the conversations as a shared story, secondly the conversation as a bypassing story and thirdly a colliding conversation. I will illustrate them in the following passages.

The most typical conversation in the data was a conversation in which the contributions of the practitioner and the parents interlock alternately and the user of each contribution complements the shared story with her own story. In this kind of conversation the parents and practitioners seem to listen to each other. The conversation partners continue the on-going story, adding new information or interpretation in each contribution. I call this type of conversation a shared story. Passage 1 is an example of this conversation type. The conversation is about a two-year-old girl, Sanna, and her current development. It took place at the beginning of the day care year. Both Sanna's mother and father were present in the conversation with the practitioner. The main content of the conversation was Sanna's current development, especially the development of her language skills.

#### Passage 1

1 Practitioner: And about Sanna's vocabulary and speech development, you see daily

2 .. when we met again after the long vacation, I could see that she had developed  
3 enormously in speech. You even get sentences of two or three words. The first ones  
4 were clearly her humour; “you are a baby, over the table”, and then: “who are  
5 you?”, such things. “Where are you?”, and if she is drawing a self-portrait where  
6 Sanna is a cat, and ...where is the other hand? You know, she didn’t see the hand,  
7 but she perceived that there is a hand here, but where’s the other hand. Such  
8 things, really surprising things.

9 Mother: Exactly. I’m really surprised, how did she come up with something like  
10 this?

11 Practitioner: Yes. But really, she has a great sense of humour, and she also asks  
12 things like where is something, and she wants an answer, and many times when  
13 you ask where is the ball?, she tells where it is. She tastes the word, a new word,  
14 well, not necessarily new words but so that she repeats words and sort of tastes  
15 them.

16 Father: When I read a newspaper, she comes over to look at the pictures and draw-  
17 ings and wants to point at them and asks questions.

In the conversation, both the parents and the practitioners provide complementary information on the child. The conversation is an example of how the parents and the practitioners can offer different perspectives of a particular phenomena being observed regarding the child – in this instance, her language acquisition or language play. In her first address in the passage, the practitioner describes the child’s recent use of language in the day care centre. She also highlights very correctly her own professional expertise, for example, by referring to the child’s “sentences of two or three words”. The parents, in turn, contribute to the conversation by describing the child’s linguistic performance in the home environment. An example of this is the father’s last contribution regarding Sanna’s interest in the pictures in his newspaper. “When I read a newspaper, she comes over to look at the pictures and drawings and wants to point at them and asks questions.” Such an exchange of information provides the participants with a fuller conception of the child, in this case, on her linguistic development (moving towards longer sentences) and the objects of her linguistic interest (asking questions; the use of pictures to promote the discussion).

Even though the parents and the practitioner construct a shared story about the child’s within the conversation, the practitioner dominates the majority of the conversation. She is clearly the leader of the conversation and the introducer of the themes. The parents act as complementary contributors to the story, taking up the themes of the discussion opened up by the practitioner. This kind of situation occurs quite often in the conversations between parents and early years practitioners. The practitioners are usually seen as having the responsibility for employing the partnership approach (e.g. The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2003, p. 28). Consequently, this responsibility is interpreted to mean a leading role in the conversations. The limitation to such a model is that the concerns or ideas of the parents may not surface.

The stories of the parent and the practitioner did not complement one another in all conversations. Passage 2 is an example of such a conversation in which the parent and the practitioner have differing perspective and stories regarding the subject of the child's arrival to the day care centre in the mornings. The conversation concerns the experiences related to the start of year in a day care of a one-year-old girl. I refer to this type of conversation as *bypassing stories*. In this kind of conversation the practitioners and the parents are not really listening to each other but concentrating on telling their own story.

Passage 2

1 Practitioner: We tell honestly from the very beginning that **we** sat there and cried  
2 (the practitioners is referring the children even though she uses the word we). That  
3 way, it's easier to tell that now we have surpassed that stage and gained trust. But  
4 really, we may have up to nine children coming up in the morning,

5 Mother: Yes. I don't think there have been many children in the mornings when we  
6 have brought her here.

7 Practitioner: Yeah. It was just this one morning, I remember.

8 Mother: And everybody cried?

9 Practitioner: And we had a lot of children, we got new children, it was the begin-  
10 ning. Laura was one of the first children.

11 Mother: She started then, yes.

12 Practitioner: But anyway, she felt sort of bad, and she showed it by crying and it's  
13 OK, and we welcomed it.

14 Mother: Because she has always, always been taken on the lap.

In this passage, the practitioner describes, in her verbal contribution, the situation of children entering the day care centre in the mornings in the light of her own experiences. These experiences concern the scattered arrival of children throughout the day. In turn, the mother's reaction reflects her own experiences: she sees the mornings only in regards to her own experiences, where she and her child have been present. According to the mother's experience, her child has always been taken on the lap when she has entered the day care centre, in situations where there have been rather few children present. The passage is an excellent example of the challenges in the conversations. Namely, instead of continuing her own story, the practitioner has the opportunity to listen to the mother's experiences and use it as the basis for the remaining conversation. From the viewpoint of partnership development, it is essential to recognize in what ways the parents consider they are being heard in issues concerning their child. In the partnering skills of the day care practitioners, developing the skills of listening and comprehension become paramount.

The previous passage can also be explored within the wider context of cultural meanings. When the parents were interviewed, it was particularly the mothers of children under 3 years of age that highlighted their concern for justifying their

decision to bring the children to the day care centre. Both the parents and the practitioners are aware of the varying interpretations of the good childhood and good care of small children, present in the Finnish culture. For example, the frequent public discussion on the appropriate place for **care** (at home or at day care) of children under three years of age tends to put the blame on the mothers if they leave their child to the day care (not so much on the fathers, however) (Alasuutari 2003, pp. 48-67). The theme of guilt and blame forms a cultural frame of reference for both the mother's and the practitioner's roles in the situation.

In Passage 2, the mother's passages can be interpreted as reassurances for there being no need for feelings of guilt. The child has "always been taken on the lap" every time the mother and the child have entered the day care centre, therefore the child is being cared for. The contributions of the practitioner, too, can be regarded as protestations against any feelings of worry/guilt. For instance, the practitioner describes the occupational practices in her group (lines 1-4), from the viewpoint of gaining both the parents' and the child's trust. In these practices, the starting point is that the difficulty of the child's and the parent's parting and the related feelings are met in an open and honest way (line 12-13).

The following passage is an example of a conversation in which the mother and the practitioner have different interpretations, in this particular case in regards to the child's eating habits. The level of match or mismatch of the interpretation is significant for how the contribution by one conversation partner is heard and interpreted by the other. This, in turn, affects the course of the conversation. This type of conversation is referred to as a *colliding conversation*, one that holds the possibility of a full conflict.

### Passage 3

1 Practitioner: But you know about lunch. She sits on the chairman's seat, she has  
2 her own chair. ...It (the practitioner is referring to the new seat and the new place at  
3 the top of the table) is strange and you don't know what to do, but this thing took a  
4 couple of days. (To get familiar with the new seat and the new place)

5 Mother: I think she's an impatient eater at least at home, she loses interest in eat-  
6 ing quite soon and then she needs to get out.

7 Practitioner: Well, that doesn't happen here at all anymore. Maybe she tried at first  
8 ... By the way, what kind of a chair does she have at home?

9 Mother: She sits in one of those things you screw on the table.

10 Practitioner: It's a bit different from ours, that one...

11 Mother: But nobody has these kinds of tables at home, such low tables. I can't put  
12 her on a chair yet, I feel like she's going to fall.

13 Practitioner: No. We have this cart here... for feeding and...

14 Mother: But her Grandma, you know, always feeds her on the lap. They cannot  
15 understand that I put her on a high chair, but that she doesn't eat any better on  
16 my lap than in the high chair, she stays there while she wants and that's it, period.

At the beginning of the passage, the practitioner describes, to the mother, the eating habits of her one-year-old child in the day care centre. The practitioner's description conveys a positive image of the child's eating (1-4). In her response, the mother offers a different view as she has noticed that the child is an impatient eater at home (5-6). The practitioner goes on with her description and replies to the mother's viewpoint by stating that the behaviour described by the mother is no longer observed occurring in the day care centre (7-8). At one stage, the practitioner poses a significant question: 'What kind of a chair does she have at home?', which is a pivotal point in the conversation. The exchanges which follow carry on with regard to the child's chair, and there is a sudden shift in the mother's tone: her tone suggests that she has interpreted the practitioner's comment regarding the comparison of home and day care chairs, as blame against the situation at home, and starts to defend her own practice (11-12). The mother's final verbal exchanges (14-16) in this extract reflects a wider frame of reference in which the mother interprets the practitioner's talk; the mother appears to have already discussed the issue with the grandmother who too, has a view on a suitable eating place. In the context of various interpretations, the conversation transforms into an arena in which the 'correct' environment for eating is being defined. In regards to supporting the development of a partnership, the tone acquired in the conversation is a challenging one. Instead of seeing the different daily environments of the child as potential for the child's development, an impossible similarity may be expected. However, the practitioner shows sensitivity and responds to the mother's exasperation when she says: 'No. We have this cart here... for feeding and...'. In this exchange, when the practitioner says 'no' her tone is non-defensive or argumentative, rather an 'oh no, not at all'. The practitioner uses a few, admittedly rather vague, expressions to highlight the fact that the situation in the day care centre is totally different than the one at the home, 'we have this cart and...' trying to appease the mother. The practitioner's chosen method prevents the situation from developing into a conflict. The mother's tone is essentially calmer when she starts to describe the grandmother's views on suitable eating habits for the child.

## Partnership, Power, and Expertise

In the majority of the conversations, the parents and the practitioners described the child's action and behaviour in the home and day care, by complementing each other. The analysis of the data (18 conversations) suggests however, that usually the practitioners use a larger proportion of the time than the parents in terms of their verbal contributions. The practitioners also acted as initiators and leaders in a majority of the conversations. The fact that these conversations were mainly lead by the practitioners seems to support the claim that childcare professionals have dominance over parents. The findings of Elliott (2004) also support the statement. She interviewed 188 parents in Sydney, Australia. Parents recommended that early childhood educators rethink the conceptions of partnership: they believed that educators acted as gatekeepers over knowledge about the curriculum and pedagogy preventing a shared enterprise between home and service learning contexts. Anyhow, the situation is a complicated one. Quite often, parents also have a tendency to take a secondary role in the partnership. This may be a result of their interest to hear what the early years practitioner has to

say in that they trust the professionals more than themselves. The other reason may be that the parents feel inadequate because they are not given a real opportunity for reciprocal communication.

In some conversations, the question of power and dominance was more prominent. An example of such a conversation is presented in Passage 3. This conversation raised the question of the power to decide on the correct caring practices for the child. In this discussion, the mother seems to want to decide herself on the practices that are suitable for taking care and educating (developing the eating habits of) her child. Her interpretation of her role in the partnership is that of a strong actor. The other data collected (interviews with parents, observations of the situations) also support this view, regarding the particular parent. The question of power also emerges when the goal of the conversation is to locate a solution to a problematic situation. The phenomenon of power is present when deciding on whose interpretation of the situation becomes dominant in the conversation and how it happens. Passage 4 discusses the lack of friends of the 5-year-old Antti. The conversation of the practitioner and Antti's father takes place at the beginning of the new day care year. Antti had changed groups, and the practitioner and the father are new conversational partners. Both Antti's mother and father work at the centre of the town. Their workday usually ends at 4 p.m. and it then takes about 45 minutes to drive to the day care centre. Therefore, Antti's day at the day care centre carries on until 5 p.m., not unusual for many children in Finland.

Passage 4.

1 Practitioner: So, he has found his feet here all right.

2 Father: Yeah. He's lacking friends, though. Mostly he would like to spend time with  
3 friends, and sometimes he says that he would like to have more friends.

4 Practitioner: Oh, that he has no friends?

5 Father: Yes.

6 Practitioner: I see, yes. Does he talk about anything else besides his friends?

7 Father: Well, not much. He plays with Maija (Antti's little sister) here in the day  
8 care centre.

9 Practitioner: Well, Matti is one of Antti's bosom friends, they play quite a lot to-  
10 gether, but about Antti's friends, when you look at them play here during the day...  
11 Lauri and Eetu go together, and they sort of, all the boys of that age that we have  
12 here, five-year-olds, they all play together.

13 Father: It may be that they don't consider someone a friend.

14 Practitioner: Yes, so why does Antti feel that..., if he thinks that he doesn't have  
15 friends, but they do play well together, Antti is not much alone. So if that makes  
16 you wonder, you shouldn't worry. It's very clear that when they play outside, of  
17 course Antti spends a long day here, so could it be that he feels that he doesn't have  
18 a friend here all the time. It seems, the last hours of the day must seem really long.

19 Father: I see...

20 Practitioner: Yes, because I have noticed the same thing, you know, when we have  
21 talked with the other parents who fetch their children really late, up to 5 p.m., past  
22 5 p.m., the children have said exactly the same thing, and I have noticed it's defi-  
23 nitely not a question of the child not having friends but...

24 Father: They do. But they have the present moment and the memory moment.

25 Practitioner: Yes, and it may be that the last hour is terribly hard for the child,  
26 they just wait and wait and wait, and then you do not necessarily have any friends  
27 left.

28 Father: Yeah.

The conversation between the father and the practitioner goes on to discuss other things, but the initial themes are touched upon once again at the end of the meeting.

29 Practitioner: Yeah. But anything that you might have during the year, if you have  
30 something special and Antti still continues to tell you he has no friends, we'll go  
31 through these things again. But I do think that Antti has friends all right, so you  
32 shouldn't worry about that. Of course you can talk to him and ask him what he  
33 thinks, maybe he sometimes feels that he doesn't have any friends here...

34 Father: It may be the last hours of the day.

35 Practitioner: I just feel that it shows, I don't know whether it's true with Antti, but  
36 the other children who stay really late, you know, their parents sort of think that it  
37 could be ... it could be this because you're not the only one who says so and whose  
38 children spend a long day here.

39 Father: They don't even remember what they did in the morning.

40 Practitioner: Yes, and if you think of the friends, ... and Matti doesn't stay after 4  
41 p.m., so it must be the last hour that Antti has to spend with his sister, play at the  
42 yard and just look around, so this may affect him.

At the beginning of the conversation, the father expresses his concern about his child's expressed feelings of loneliness and his lack of friends (2-3). The practitioner is seen trying to understand the situation with her questions (4, 6) and ends with an interpretation (16-18) upon which the child's feelings and experiences of lacking friends are the result of the last hours of the day in the centre when he is waiting for his parents to pick him up and his best friends are gone home already. The father shows (19) that he has heard and considered the practitioner's interpretation, but does not commit himself on the matter yet. The practitioner continues to justify her interpretation by referring to previous observed experiences and other children's behaviours (20-23).

The father offers (24) his interpretation of the situation, pondering it from the point of view of the child's memory functions. However, the practitioner does not address the father's reasoning, but instead continues to develop her own interpre-

tation. The father then indicates that he approves of the practitioner's interpretation, at least with certain reserve (Line 34). As if to further convince the father of the accuracy of her interpretation, the practitioner highlights the other parents' interpretations of similar situations (36-38). The father comes back (39) to his earlier considerations on children's memory. There is still no direct response in the practitioner's speech. The practitioner is probably trying to appease the father's concern about the child by using the method of ignoring.

The conversations can be examined both from the perspective of what was said and what was left unsaid. In the previous example, the long day at the centre is given as a potential reason for the child's perceived problem. The practitioner firmly keeps to the interpretation she forms during the course of the conversation. She seems to have observational evidence that the child does interact with others throughout the day, which makes her interpretation of the situation understandable.

That said, she does not question her interpretation or pause to discuss with the father the possible reasons for the child's feelings of not having friends during the day. Though the practitioner does not directly deliver a criticism towards the parents about their long work day, it is possible to interpret from her repetition of the 'long day' as an indirect prompt to the parents to shorten their workday; something which is very difficult for the parents. In the course of the conversation, the practitioner does not direct her concern on what could be done in the centre to relieve the child's potential loneliness. From the viewpoint of this particular partnership, the conversation appears to illustrate the occupational attitude of early year practitioners that tends to blame the parents rather than to solve the problems together and share the educational task. Furthermore, the conversation may become frustrating for the father rather than deepening mutual understanding.

The above conversation has been analysed together with the practitioner in question. When reading her own speech as text, the practitioner was somewhat surprised by the course of the conversation. She paid attention to her habit of repeating her own interpretations, and also on her strong linguistic expression. The practitioner said that her aim in the conversation was to prove that the child's day at the day care is by no means entirely branded by loneliness, but that it may only be a question of the last few hours. The passage excellently highlights the challenge set for the practitioners of recognizing the implications and the consequences of their professional talk while in interaction with parents and others. The consequences are seen in the development of the partnership between the parents and the practitioners, or as impediments therein. Ultimately, the consequences are also reflected upon in the lives of the respective children. The influences on the children are realized indirectly. The level of confidence of the parents and the early year practitioners as educators is particularly significant.

## Discussion

In Finland, co-operation between parents and practitioners has been aimed towards developing a partnership in an effort to support children's growth, development and learning. In this article, I have examined this co-operation and interaction from the perspective of conversations between the parents and the practitioners of the children at one particular day care setting. The conversations between parents and practitioners are thought-provoking. In their verbal exchanges, both the parents and the practitioners reveal their basic beliefs concerning the child, education, and day care practices. The way these conversational partners hear and interpret each others' beliefs is crucial for the development of early childhood education and care partnership because the very essence of partnership requires the mutual understanding and reciprocity. The investigation of the interaction between parents and day care professionals may have important implications on the early years training.

The analysis of the 18 conversations that served as data suggests that the conversational practices are mainly built upon the foundations set by day care professionals. The day care practitioners in this sample seem to dominate more time talking than parents; and even in smooth, polite conversations, it is the day care professionals who mostly define the topics to be treated. The parents are mostly left with a supplementary and conforming role. In certain conversations, the parents' interpretations and viewpoints were completely overlooked.

However, the study shows that the parents are actually quite vocal when it comes to issues that concern their children's happiness or basic needs. For example, the father bringing up the situation regarding his son's friendship issue and then not agreeing completely with the practitioner and the mother who was quite confrontational about the eating habits of her child seem to aim towards active participation. If the parents' participation in their involvement of public early childhood education institutions is wished to encourage, the working practices must be developed towards a direction where real participation is possible.

The article hopefully illustrates the complexity of the partnership and gives some ideas for detecting the potential obstacles for the partnership and the things supporting the partnership. Even if the sample is rather small and the interpretation of the discourses taking place in the conversations is challenging, the study shows some of the main difficulties related to the reciprocal partnership. If the conversational practices are wished to genuinely develop on the basis of partnership, it is essential to improve their contents and course. A deep partnership cannot be created merely via exchanging information; shared interpretations and decision-making are also needed.

One significant point in the early childhood education and care partnership is who has the possibility, permission, or power to claim the subject position in the relationship. Traditionally, the expert role of the practitioners has justified their subject position. The situation is more complex with the parents. In Finland, the parents have had the statutory right (Act of Children's Day care 367/1973) to a day care place for their child since 1996, which means the users of day care services come from all population groups. Therefore, parents as partners represent

the entire spectrum of different socio-economical and cultural backgrounds in society. It can also be presumed that the parents' position in co-operation with the day care centre partly reflects their status and position in society and working life. A challenge is set for the practitioners to enable an active subject position of all parents and to particularly support parents with no previous experiences of such a position. The development of early childhood education and care partnership can thus be considered to be of utmost importance for the empowerment of parents, particularly as parents but also in more general terms as citizens. Such a challenging work requires that the practitioners reflect on their own interpretations of expertise and their use of power.

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