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Trust in the educational partnership narrated by parents of a child with challenging behaviour

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Abstract

This study examined trust in educational partnership in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland, from the viewpoint of parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Typically, such children have difficulties in regulating their behaviour and emotions. Identifying the elements of trust that are critical in successful educational partnership between parents and educators is of special interest in this study. Semi-structured interviews with 23 parents were analysed in terms of content in a narrative framework. The analysis revealed two critical elements of trust in educational partnership: 1) Child well-being in the day care centre, and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration. Critical factors in the first trust element were educators' respectful and good-quality relationship with the child and fair and meaningful pedagogical practices. In the second trust element, the critical aspects were educators' support of parents as capable mothers and fathers, and encouragement of parents as active partners in the educational partnership. These findings of this study enrich understanding of the development of trust in educational partnership when working with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour.

Keywords: a child with challenging behaviour, early childhood education, educational partnership, parent, trust.

Introduction

Trust has been shown to be the foundation of a well-functioning parent-educator relationship (Summers et al. 2005; Kikas et al. 2011, 2016; Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011)

and a successful educational partnership (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Keen 2007). Trust in educational partnership is built reciprocally (Keen 2007), and is important not only from the viewpoint of the child and the child's achievement but also from the viewpoint of the child's parents (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010). The processes that hinder the development of trust in the parent-educator partnership are multifaceted. For example, a child's challenging behaviour is a factor that may contribute to a conflictual educator-child relationship (Mantzicopoulos 2005). In turn, a good quality teacher-child relationship is associated with a decrease in a child's externalizing behaviour (Silver et al. 2005). Challenging behaviour, such as that characterizing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (e.g., oppositional or aggressive behaviour), is associated with teacher stress (Greene et al. 2002) and dysfunctional teaching strategies (Kos, Richdale, and Hay 2006). Parents' perceptions of ECEC educators' dysfunctional teaching strategies and a negative child image and educator-child relationship (Rautamies et al. 2016) are assumed to hinder the development of parental trust in the educational partnership. Thus, family-sensitive ECEC arrangements, which include educators' ethical attitude and behaviour towards the child and his/her parents (Bromer et al. 2011) and educators' professional competence and expertise (Karila 2008), are assumed to be important when collaborating with the parents of a child with challenging behaviour.

This study examined trust in the educational partnership between parents and educators in the Finnish ECEC context. According to Finnish guiding ECEC documents, educational partnership is described as a '*child-centred connection between the partners who share the responsibility for supporting the well-being, growth, development and learning of the child*' (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; FNBE 2014, 2016). In a successful educational partnership, the partners work together and share the responsibility for the child's learning and development (Epstein 2010, 4). In Finland, equality in the parent-educator relationship and an active role and commitment by both partners are emphasized. ECEC educators in Finland have two important goals: to support the child, and to support the parents as the principle educators of their child. The importance of parental support is further emphasized in the case of a child with behavioural and developmental difficulties (Dunst and Dempsey 2007). Parents of a child with challenging behaviour are more prone to experiencing emotional stress and inadequacy over their child's upbringing (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Peters and Jackson 2008); moreover, they face difficulties in finding effective pedagogical methods for the purpose (Lange et al. 2005). Family-sensitive ECEC practices and educational partnership based on trust empower parents (Dunst and Dempsey 2007) by promoting child, parent, and family outcomes; enhancing parenting skills;

decreasing parental stress; and strengthening parental confidence and well-being (Bromer et al. 2011). Further, parental trust in educational partnership is also related to involvement of parents, which is an important basis for meaningful child support (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice 2010). Finnish parents are generally satisfied with the commitment and reliability of their ECEC educators, and the level of mutual parent-teacher trust in Finnish preschools is high (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011). However, while parents are satisfied with the manner in which educators work with their children, they are less satisfied with how educators support them as the principle educators of their child (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011).

This research highlights the importance of parental trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context in cases where a child exhibits challenging behaviour -that is, difficulties in behavioural and emotional regulation (Barkley 2004). To date, only a few studies have addressed this specific issue (e.g. Dunlap and Fox 2007), and trust in the parent-educator relationship has mainly been studied in the school context (e.g. Adams, Fortsyth, and Mitchell 2009). Thus, there is a need to investigate parental trust in educators in the ECEC context, particularly from the viewpoint of parents whose child exhibits challenging behaviour.

Trust in the educational partnership

In this study, educational partnership is defined as ‘*mutually supportive interaction between families and professionals focused on meeting the needs of children and families*’ (Summers et al. 2005, 66). This definition emphasizes both the reciprocal nature of the educational partnership and the importance of successful collaboration in meeting the needs of parents and children. Slightly modifying the definition of trust in the family–school relationship used by Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods (2010, 66), we define parental trust in the educational partnership in ECEC as ‘*parents’ confidence that educators will act in a manner that benefits the relationship, or the goals of the relationship, in seeking to achieve positive outcomes on behalf of the child and the parents*’. Trust is presumed to be enhanced when parents believe in the competence of educators as ECEC professionals (Blue-Banning et al. 2004). Moreover, trust is based on the expectations that people have of other role groups (e.g. educators) (Adams, Fortsyth, and Mitchell 2009), which are linked to prevailing institutional and cultural role expectations. For example, as educators in Finnish ECEC are highly qualified and well-educated professional actors, parents may have high expectations with regard to their competence.

Reliability, safety and discretion have been identified as indicators of trust in the parent-teacher relationship (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 174; Summers et al. 2005). From the parental viewpoint, reliability refers to consistency in the teacher's verbal communication and behaviour, which is reflected through, for example, statements like 'educators "do what they say"' (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179). A high level of integrity is evident when one's words match their behaviour, thereby reflecting one's strong moral-ethical perspectives (Clarke et al. 2010, 67). Safety refers to parents' feelings of confidence or peace of mind in leaving their child at the day care centre and trusting that the child will receive education and care that is of good quality (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179.) Discretion refers to the confidentiality of the parent-educator relationship, which implies that parents can trust that educators will maintain confidentiality of the information they have about the child and his/her family and protect their privacy (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 179; Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011). Typically, in such a relationship, the partners also have confidence in the responsibility, competence, openness, and honesty of the other party (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 174). Further, the importance of mutual respect in the educational partnership is frequently emphasized (Keen 2007; Minke 2006). Trust between the partners is presumed to be enhanced when educators respect parents as the primary educators of the child, and parents respect educators as ECEC professionals. In educational partnership, both partners recognize the importance of the other partner, and the ideas and perspectives of both partners are given cognisance to and taken into account in discussions and decision-making (Clarke et al. 2010). The educator's ability to view matters from the parents' perspective is also assumed to be important in the development of trust.

Trust is a continuously evolving and dynamic phenomenon (Clarke et al. 2010) that can increase or decrease depending on the partners' interactional experiences (Poikonen and Kontoniemi 2011; Clarke et al. 2010, 68). Parent-educator trust is developed relationally over time through commitment, collaboration, and positive interactional experiences (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007; Minke 2006). A child's challenging behaviour may not only test but also strengthen parent-educator collaboration and improve the experience of parental trust in a successful educational partnership.

In the studies cited above, trust in the educational partnership was investigated among parents whose children did not present specific behavioural challenges. Hence, the focus of the present study is on identifying the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership perceived by parents of children who have difficulties in regulating their behaviour and emotions.

Methods

Participants and data collection

The data comprise interviews with 23 parents (18 mothers and 5 fathers) of children who exhibit challenging behaviour that is typical of children with difficulties in self-regulation (Barkley 2004) and ADHD (Cooper and Bilton 2013). A majority of the interviews ($n = 21$) were conducted in the period 2011–2013 (see Rautamies et al. 2017). The participants were clients of Finnish ECEC services for at least 10 months. The child in question was typically a six- to seven- year-old ‘preschooler’ boy (girls in three interviews) at the time of the interview. Participation in the study was voluntary. Most ($n = 15$) of the parents were recruited via the Family School program (for more details, see Rautamies et al. 2016) and the remainder ($n = 8$) were contacted by informing day care centres, primary schools (first-grade classrooms), and the local ADHD association about the study. Only those parents who had a child with challenging behaviour were invited to participate in the study. Eligible parents were informed about the aims, manner of proceedings, and voluntary nature of the study; moreover, relevant ethical principles were carefully discussed with them before research consent forms were signed. It was emphasized that the anonymity of the parents, their child, the day care centre, and the child’s educators would be guaranteed when reporting the study’s findings.

The qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted mostly by the first author in a conversational situation in a peaceful room at the university. In line with the narrative research framework (Riessman 2008), attention was paid to the creation of a confidential interview situation in which the interviewer’s role was to listen to the parents. The parents were asked to narrate their experiences of the educational partnership as parents of a child with challenging behaviour. More specifically, they were asked to describe the path of their educational partnership and narrate their good and bad interactional and collaborative experiences, such as daily discussions, educational discussions, and discussions on the child’s individual education plan with the child’s ECEC educators. First, the parents were asked to discuss their child and his/her challenging behaviour in the day care centre; subsequently, they were asked to narrate their experiences of interaction with the child’s ECEC educators on matters concerning their child. In addition, the interviewer asked supplementary or more specific questions when she felt she needed more information on the topic being discussed by the parent. On average, the interviews lasted a little over one hour and ranged from

approximately one to three hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis

In this study, as we were particularly interested in parents' narrated experiences regarding factors that were crucial in developing their trust in the educational partnership, we employed a narrative approach (Squire 2008; Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2008). The analytical process began with careful reading of the interview transcripts to identify and extract all the narration considered relevant to the issue of parental trust in the educational partnership. These narratives (i.e., small narratives reflecting parents' experiences of trust) most typically revolved around interactional situations with specific educators or educators' pedagogical activities with their child. They ranged in length from a few sentences to larger textual entities. First, parents' descriptions of interactional episodes with descriptions of related experiences with specific educators were extracted bearing in mind that parent-educator trust is developed particularly through positive interactional experiences (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007; Minke 2006). In addition, all aspects of the parents' narration of experiences that they considered or described as significant in the educational partnership were of special interest, which included when they were talking about 'trust' or 'confidence'. Finally, the parents' descriptions of educators' pedagogical activities with their child and their attitude towards the child were extracted, since child-centred ECEC practices are related to parental trust (Kikas et al. 2016). The interviews mostly contained narrative accounts which reflected parental trust in educational partnership; however, they also included some narrative accounts with low or missing parental trust.

After identifying and extracting the smaller narratives (Squire 2008; Squire, Andrewe, and Tamboukou 2008) relevant to the issue of parental trust, they were analysed (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998) in three phases. First, they were named according to the main content. After comparing their similarities and differences, four categories were identified: respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship; fair and meaningful pedagogical practices; supporting parents as capable mothers and fathers; and encouraging parents to be active partners in the educational partnership. Finally, in order to describe the main elements of parental trust, the four categories were grouped into two main categories based on their content: 1) Child well-being in the day care centre and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration.

Results: The elements of parental trust in the educational partnership

This study examined trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of the parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Here, the elements of parental trust identified as critical in the educational partnership will be described.

Child well-being in the day care centre

The well-being of the child in the day care centre was identified as the first main category of the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership. It was also the primary concern of all the interviewed parents. As one mother said, ‘It is so important he (the child) can feel safe and well in the day care centre’. The parents gained understanding of their child’s well-being in the day care centre by talking to the educators and listening to their child’s experiences. For parents to feel safe, it was important to receive sufficient information from the educators regarding their child’s day and their peer relationships. Trust was not present when parents were worried about their child’s wellbeing in the daycare center. Below, the sub-categories of a child’s well-being are described in greater detail.

A respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship

Educators’ attitudes towards and conceptions with regard to the child were the dominant themes in parents’ narratives on their child’s well-being. The parents extensively discussed whether or not the educators understood, accepted, and liked their child. From the viewpoint of developing trust, as it was critical that ‘educators saw the child as a good and not as a bad or challenging child’, as one mother stated. It was also important that ‘the child’s difficulties were not magnified by the educators’. Further, the parents emphasized the importance of educators having a holistic and realistic understanding of the child, including the child’s strengths as well as challenges, as described by one mother:

They (educators) know the child and they accept the child, and they see him in a realistic way as he is... Both the child’s strengths and challenges have been shared and discussed with the educators. Because there are two sides to him.
(Mari)

For the parents, it was important that the educators’ saw their child as a unique being and accepted the child the way he/she is. According to the mother cited above, ‘more important than all the educational tricks in the book like how to get the child to dress, is to trust and

believe in the child'. Educators' trust in the child and in the parents was emphasized by the parents, and this was interpreted to promote the feeling of hope; this was evident from one mother's statement:

It was so important to notice that she (the educator) believed in our child and she believed we can cope as parents. I don't know what had happened, if she would have said that it can't be helped. (Anna)

For the parents, it was important that educators did not see the child 'as a bad child' or 'the wrong kind of child' by 'seeing only the negative features of the child', in the words of one mother, Johanna. A child's experience of 'being stigmatized as a bad child' or as 'a teaser' was typical while discussing missing trust. One father was relieved, when after communicating with the educators, he realized that 'the behaviour of his child did not result from his daughter being mean, but there was a reason why she behaved challengingly'.

Parents who expressed trust in the educators typically described the educator-child relationship as a warm or caring relationship with mutual positive emotions and attachment. For example, one father said,

We and our child were important to her (the educator), and our daughter liked her so much (the educator) too'. (Max)

These parents were relieved when they felt the child's challenging behaviour did not negatively influence the educator-child relationship or the educator's image of the child. In contrast, in interviews where the parents described the educator-child relationship as conflictual or dys-functional indicated the absence of trust. For example, as Jaana said,

'He was just a wrong kind of child, who was not understood neither liked nor accepted by the educator of the child group'(Jaana)

Thus, parents' experiences of respectful and good-quality educator-child relationship was perceived as one of the most critical elements in developing parental trust in the educational partnership.

Fair and meaningful pedagogical practices

Fair pedagogical practices, including equity and equality, were identified as the second critical element in developing parental trust in the educational partnership in relation to the well-being of the child. Parents felt that it was important that their child 'was treated the same as the other children in the group', and that 'the educators made an effort to keep the child from standing out in the group'. All the parents considered it important that educators attempt

to prevent their child from being ‘stigmatized as a bad child’ and being ‘falsely accused’, which were typical while discussing missing trust.

The parents also felt relieved when they did not need to be apprehensive of whether or not the educators could cope with their child’s potentially challenging behaviour:

The educators always emphasized that they will cope with the situations with our child, that we don’t need to be worried. (Anna)

The educators were objective and committed and they could cope with different kinds of educational challenges presented by the child... the educators dealt with the specific challenges of the child neutrally by working professionally.
(Max)

The objective and professionally competent behaviour of the educators and their commitment to their educational work were both emphasized by the parents. Perceiving the behaviour of educators and their pedagogical methods as meaningful was a critical element that constituted parental trust. Parents found it helpful that educators focused on supporting the child in difficult situations and not on the child’s challenging behaviour. For example, one mother narrated that an educator told her that she supported her son, who had daily difficulties in dressing, by putting the child’s clothes in a separate room and standing patiently nearby until the child managed to get dressed.

In general, for parents, it was important to know that the educators showed professional expertise and took responsibility for dealing fairly with the child in challenging situations, as the following contrasting extracts reveal:

The educators worked so well, for example, in challenging situations or when dealing with tantrums. We have not noticed any kind of injustice; our daughter is very sensitive in such situations, and they (the educators) described her and her activities always with respect. (Max)

The educators did not show any professional competence at all...they did not know how to cooperate with him, he was a big trouble for them... and I feel so sad because he did not have any friends there at all. (Sara)

It was important for the parents that the educators took pedagogical responsibility for their child’s well-being in a day care centre. The parents felt relieved when they noticed that educators actively supported the child’s peer relationships and play activities, and when they did not need to be apprehensive that the child would be teased by the other children. This

confirms that fair and meaningful pedagogy based on high-quality ethical principles were identified as critical in developing parental trust in educational partnership.

A supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration

The second main category of the critical elements of trust was parents' experience of being supported by their child's educators. This experience was perceived by parents as rather important. One mother said that as a stay-at-home mother, she would have felt as if she were 'alone in a dark forest' without the support of the educators. She was 'so relieved to have the educators as educational partners' and stated that without their support she and her husband 'would have been lost'. In the trust narratives, parents mentioned that the possibility of sharing the educational responsibility of a child with challenging behaviour with childcare professionals brought them a feeling of relief. Next, the two sub-categories of parental experiences of support from educators are described.

Supporting parents as capable mothers and fathers

Parents typically related to themselves as being unsure parents with low self-confidence who needed encouragement in the parenting process. They described educators as supportive of them, for example, through positive feedback such as telling them, 'You have done well with your child in this matter'. Parents emphasized the importance of 'their capability as parents not being questioned by educators', as one mother put it. Further, several parents expressed their need to be accepted and respected as parents and as educational partners despite all the difficulties that they may have with their child. In addition, most parents highlighted a feeling of not being blamed and judged by educators because of the child's challenging behaviour. The experiences of 'being blamed' and feeling guilty were typical while narrating missing trust, as stated by Jaana:

It made me think that incompetent parenting was the reason for the challenging behaviour of our son...And I felt I caused the sick leaves of the staff. (Jaana)

Thus, it is evident that the lack of attributions of blame and being negatively judged were essential in the development of trust in the parent-educator relationship. One mother considered the reporting of her child's challenging behaviour as making demands on parents and stated that 'parents' concerns got buried under these kinds of demands'.

Further, parents emphasized the importance of a respectful attitude toward the parents and neutral and positive everyday communication, particularly in pick-up situations.

They never had a disrespectful attitude toward us, and we just talked neutrally in pick-up-situations, what had happened, and we discussed how these kinds of situations could be prevented. (Max)

Positive communication also included being able to share positive emotions with the educators. Experiences like ‘rejoicing together when the child had succeeded in coping with his tantrum’ were considered to strengthen parents’ experience of hope and trust. For several parents, it was important not to be afraid of receiving excessively distressing daily reports regarding their child’s behaviour. One mother described the daily reports as ‘gentle and kindly meant information about the day’s challenges’, while another mother said that ‘the pick-up situations were so frightening’ for her, when she was told about the happenings of the day. It was important for parents that, when communicating with them, educators emphasized ‘the positive features of the child’. One mother made an agreement with an educator that the latter would not report the entire day’s negative events in pick-up situations. Mostly, however, the parents emphasized the importance of open and honest parent-educator communication, as one father said,

They (educators) have been sincere and honest, and they have never tried to hide anything. If they have had a challenging day, they have said that honesty to us, as well as when something has gone very well. (Markku)

A priority in the educational partnership for all the parents was the experience of being heard by the educators.

I feel it is so important, that (as a parent) you can feel you are being listened to and heard with all your concerns, and it is not purely that your child is a bad child... The child’s difficulties and the parents’ concerns were not magnified or dismissed by the educators. For me, the most important thing is that the educators take us seriously, and that they look kindly on our son. (Mari)

Parents felt that it was important that all kinds of thoughts and emotions could be discussed with the child’s educators, particularly their concerns regarding the child’s well-being and peer relations. Finally, positive, open, and honest communication along with being respected, accepted, and heard by the educators appeared to be critical in the development of parental trust in the educational partnership, while also enhancing parents’ perceptions of themselves as capable mothers and fathers.

Encouraging parents to be active partners in the educational partnership

Several parents stated the importance of confidential discussions, and they appreciated having the possibility of actively influencing the educational partnership. For example, meetings in which the child's individual educational plan was discussed and evaluated by both parents and educators were highly valued by all the parents. This is because such meetings made it possible to discuss the child's behaviour and the special support needed by the child in the day care centre and at home, as well as to discuss and agree on deeper educational principles. The importance of confidential discussions was highlighted by two fathers in the following extracts.

We always have had a common time to discuss with the educators. And whenever we have had any worries, there has always been an educator with whom to discuss...They have listened to us and they have listened to our daughter too. (Max)

Because we have been thinking together, and we have made agreements, so we have not had any difficulties in educational partnership. It has been important to have a common understanding of the situation. (Max)

Important and commonly agreed goals have been achieved...and it was so important for us to notice how much his self-confidence was strengthened. (Markku)

Parents felt that confidential discussions must be arranged in an appropriate physical context, which strengthened the feeling of safety, as one mother stated. Most parents stated that a low turnover of educators was a prerequisite for confidential parent-educator relationships and discussions. According to Sara, 'it was simply impossible to create a relationship with the educators when they changed too often'. According to her, a high turnover of personnel was one reason for an increase in her child's challenging behaviour and associated difficulties.

Further, dialogical discussions were a prerequisite and a sign of active parental influence in the educational partnership. The importance of both partners sharing their thoughts about the child's personality and behaviour before constructing the child's profile and the child's challenging behaviour was emphasized by the parents. They felt that it was important that educators took into consideration not only the parents' knowledge of their child but also their understanding of the particular methods and parenting practices that worked with the child. Parents' active influence in the educational partnership produced a

shared understanding of the child and his/her behaviour, which was emphasized by the parents as being important:

I felt that the educators had a similar understanding of the child's behaviour in certain situations as we parents did, which generated strong confidence in everything going well at the day care centre. (Mari)

Unfortunately, all parents did not reach a common understanding of the child with the educators' despite several initiatives, as Jaana said, which can be interpreted to be a critical experience of developing missing trust.

Some parents reported relief at having the possibility of influencing how their child's transition to school was implemented. Giving parents the possibility of making decisions in educational meetings was also evidence of the trust that educators placed in them. Experiences of successful collaborative activities were considered to strengthen the mutual trust between the partners. This happened, for example, when educators and parents supported the child together in the handling of difficult emotions. In such situations, both partners played an important role in supporting the child. The importance of the connection between parental trust and active parental influence in educational partnership is summed up in the following extract.

Trust in the educators is the be-all and end-all of the educational partnership....If you can't trust the educators when communicating with them, you can't talk to them. (Mari)

A successful educational partnership which produces positive outcomes—such as a common understanding of the child, shared educational goals, and commonly agreed upon educational principles and meaningful pedagogical methods—was regarded as critical from the viewpoint of developing parental trust, while also enhancing parents' experience of empowerment.

Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study identified the critical elements of trust in the educational partnership in the ECEC context from the viewpoint of the parents of a child with challenging behaviour. The following two main categories were identified as critical in developing parental trust: 1) Child well-being and 2) a supportive parent-educator relationship and collaboration. The first contained two sub-categories. The first sub-category comprised parental confidence in educators as ECEC professionals whose pedagogical practices were meaningful and fair and who coped with the challenging behaviour of their child. The second category also contained two sub-categories: one comprised parents' experience of being supported by their child's

educators; the other sub-category involved collaboration, which produced a shared understanding of and support for the child. Moreover, in line with the studies by Laakso and colleagues (2011) and Peters and Jackson (2008), parents' experience of being supported by educators in bringing up their child with challenging behaviour was also important. Supporting parents by treating them as being good mothers and fathers was found to be critically important in developing parental trust in the educational partnership, thereby enhancing parents' belief in themselves as capable parents and educational partners empowering the parents, which is in line with Laakso et al. 2011 (see Dunst and Dempsey 2007).

Next, the findings of this study are discussed in relation to three main indicators of trust: safety, reliability, and discretion (Blue-Banning et al. 2004). The implication of safety and reliability to parents was emphasized in the first trust element. The importance of their child's well-being in a day care centre can be interpreted to be the basis for the parents' feeling of safety. In addition, parents' perceptions with regard to good-quality educator-child relationship and fair and meaningful ECEC practices were interpreted to enhance parents' experience of safety, thereby also reflecting educators' professional competence and expertise (Karila 2008). Further, discretion played an important role in the second trust element. Parents emphasized the implication of respectful and gentle communication from the educators. It was important from the viewpoint of trust that parents were actively able to collaborate on an equal and respectful footing with their child's educators and share their educational responsibilities with them. Moreover, parents' experiences of being accepted, respected, and heard by the educators were not only critical in developing parental trust (see also Keen 2007; Kikas et al. 2011) but were also related to parents' active influence in the educational partnership (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, and Ice 2010; Keen 2007). Collaboration in which the parents were heard resulted in a shared understanding of the child and the child's difficulties as well as in the development of pedagogical practices to support the child. Enabling parents to share educational responsibility with the ECEC educators appeared to be related to parental trust (see Adams, Forsyth, and Mitchell 2009; Dunlap and Fox 2007).

This study also has certain limitations, which must be considered. Critical elements of trust in the educational partnership were investigated only from the viewpoint of parents of a child with challenging behaviour. Because of the relational nature of trust (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Keen 2007), this phenomenon must also be investigated from the viewpoint of educators. Further, most of the participants in our study were mothers (18 mothers vs. 5 fathers), who are typically the more active participants in the educational partnership.

Moreover, most of the children were boys, who more typically exhibit challenging behaviour and have conflicts with educators (Buyse et al. 2008; Doumen et al. 2008). However, the data are rich and the findings contribute to educators' understanding of the critical elements in gaining parental trust. Parental experiences of the educational partnership tended to be positive, although a few narratives also reflected a low level trust or no trust. The narratives of all the parents were utilized in seeking to identify the critical elements of trust. The reliability of the research was strengthened by using direct quotes from the interviews in this report, thereby leaving the reader free to evaluate the analytical process and the conclusions drawn. The quotes were selected in a manner that would represent the variety of views revealed by the collected data.

Finally, we highlight and discuss the following main results. First, it was important for the parents that their child's challenging behaviour did not negatively influence the educator-child or parent-educator relationship or an educator's approach towards the child and the child's parents. High-quality teacher education, in-service training, and the possibility for educators to receive guidance when faced with the child's challenging behaviour are assumed to be prerequisites for the professional behaviour of ECEC educators. Second, we highlight the importance of parental support in the educational partnership. Feelings such as inadequacy, irresolution, and stress are typical for the parents of a child with challenging behaviour (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Lange et al. 2005; Peters and Jackson 2008). Despite the need for educators' support, the parental support seems to be, unfortunately, insufficient in the case of parents in such a situation (Harborne, Wolpert, and Clare 2004; Peters and Jackson 2008). This study revealed a high level of parental trust and parents' satisfaction with parental and child support, which were interrelated (Poikonen, and Kontoniemi 2011; Kikas et al. 2016). The high level of qualification required of ECEC practitioners and child-centred teaching practices as well as high teaching status in Finland may be one reason for these findings (see Kikas et al. 2016). The results of this study can be utilized in preservice and in-service training of ECEC -educators. This study provides self-assessment tools for ECEC students and educators to reflect on their behaviour, attitudes, and approaches, which is important in family-sensitive and confidential educational partnership (Bromer et al. 2011). Further, the findings emphasize the importance of listening to parents' experiences of their educational partnership when building a relationship of trust with them.

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