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Obstacles to dialogic encounters between parents and staff in pre-primary school

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated obstacles to encounters with staff as experienced by parents in the context of institutional pre-primary education in Finland. The study contributes to education research by exploring parents' perceptions and experiences of encounters with staff from the perspectives of Buber's (1923/1987; 1947/2002) dialogic philosophy and Giorgi's (1994) phenomenological psychology. The parent volunteers (n = 15) who participated in planning the local pre-primary education curriculum based on The National Core curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education 2016) met three times during the 2015–2016 school year in a city in northern Finland. In the last meeting there were five parents, whose group discussion the results of this study are principally based. The parents expressed a desire for more openness and transparency regarding daily life events and practices in pre-primary schools. They also felt that power relations created barriers to cooperation in the sense that staff did not take account of parents' perspectives on their children. The findings clarify how encounters between parents and staff crystallize in daily face-to-face discussions and suggest that dialogue between parents and staff requires time, a calm situation, a family-friendly approach, and the willingness of parents and staff to work together.

Keywords: *obstacles to cooperation, Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy, encounters, parents, phenomenology*

Introduction

This study investigates obstacles to encounters with staff experienced by the parents in the pre-primary education context in Finland. Finnish pre-primary education emphasizes cooperation between parents/guardians and staff. According to the National Core

Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), staff and parents should discuss pedagogical principles, implementation, and evaluation. Staff are expected to initiate these encounters and to facilitate cooperation between parents and staff. In daily activities, staff should take account of families' diversity and their specific needs, respecting their values and practices. Parental participation is known to promote children's healthy growth and well-being and should be supported by various means during pre-primary education (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Repo et al., 2019; Weiss, Boufford, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009).

Drawing on Buber's (1923/1987; 1947/2002) dialogic philosophy and Giorgi's (1994) phenomenological method, the present study contributes to the education research literature by exploring parents' perceptions and experiences of encounters with staff from a dialogical perspective. Most of our references (Einarsdottir, Puroila, Johansson, Bromström, & Emilson, 2015) and research precedents refer to Nordic countries, where education systems are informed by similar ideas about politics, practices, and ideologies. The Nordic welfare society and its early childhood education system is globally well regarded (Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2005).

Lundan (2011) argued that although dialogue between parents and staff is integral to pre-school life and education, parents' perceptions, opinions, and experiences of cooperation with staff have received little attention in Finnish education research (Lundan, 2011). In this regard, several studies (Hujala et al., 2012; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Pihlaja, 2009; Turunen, 2013) have noted the need for greater involvement of children and parents in early childhood education, as well as more research. To date, research has concentrated mainly on those starting school (Karikoski, 2008; Karikoski & Tiilikka, 2017; Ojala, 2013), and on teaching and children's growth, development, and learning (Alasuutari, 2013; Rouvinen, 2007). In relation to cooperation with parents, many researchers (Kirby & Laws, 2010; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Turunen, 2013) have reported a prevailing emphasis on the voices of government officials, education professionals, and researchers while parents are heard only in devising children's personal education plans. In general, parents are not likely to participate in pedagogical discussions about pre-primary education principles (Alasuutari, 2013).

Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja, and Silvennoinen (2018) reported childhood educators' view that difficulties regarding parental involvement often reflect low parental motivation and the time constraints of both educators and parents. However, parents have stressed that they would like to be able to talk informally and peacefully with staff (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2008). When dialogue is poor, parents have concerns about the lack of information about pre-primary education practices and children's daily activities. Parents who seek to collaborate may feel ignored and misunderstood by educators (Vuorinen,

2018), and cultural and linguistic obstacles may also hinder cooperation between educators and parents (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2008). MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) noted that educators often prioritize their professional knowledge over parents' informal knowledge of their own children; Einarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2017) also referred to this emphasis on expert knowledge in the parent–professional relationship. Previous Finnish research has highlighted the possibilities and challenges of cooperation and encounters between parents and staff (e.g., Alasuutari, 2010, 2011, 2013; Lipponen & Paananen, 2013; Venninen, Leinonen, Rautavaara-Hämäläinen, & Purola, 2011; Venninen & Purola, 2013). Informed by Buber's dialogic philosophy (1923/1987; 1947/2002), the present study shifts the focus from cooperation to address the following question: *What obstacles to encounters with staff do parents experience in pre-primary settings?*

Martin Buber's Dialogic Philosophy

In the present study, Buber's dialogic theory (1923/1987; 1947/2002) provides the theoretical basis for exploring how obstacles emerge in encounters between parents and staff. Buber's (1947/2002) philosophy is crystallized in his word pairs for two possible ways of encountering other human beings: "I–Thou" and "I–It." A dialogical relationship requires two distinct personas or persons who encounter each other as holistic beings. I–Thou relationships are characterized by openness, directness, mutuality, and presence, and have the potential to connect with what humans and the world originally were. In contrast, in I–It relationships, one human being defines another's various roles. I–It relationships inherently create inequalities and difficulties in encounters between humans. According to Buber, the essence of a dialogical relationship does not lie in I or You but between the two. In this liminal space, dialogical encounters involve no external need or interest in how the other is met.

Buber (1923/1987; 1947/2002) used the word-pairs I–Thou and I–It to describe humans' dual relationships with the world. I–It relationships express a natural, everyday attitude, categorizing human beings on the basis of prior knowledge and experiences. According to Buber, no encounters occur in I–It relationships because they are experienced within human beings rather than between them. In contrast, genuinely equal dialogic I–Thou encounters stretch the individually experienced world; occurring throughout one's entire presence, they enable stepping in-between and experiencing the other. Buber goes on to say that the prerequisite for a dialogical meeting is acknowledgement of another human being's otherness and uniqueness. Dialogue is possible only when all other interests are removed and a direct relationship is formed without objectives or foreknowledge.

In this way, according to Buber (1923/1987; 1947/2002), it is possible to create a liminal space between parents and staff that expresses their shared understanding. The sense of mutuality in such encounters enables participation and makes it possible to understand others' perspectives. From Buber's perspective, dialogue is essential to any such encounter between parents and staff. In the present study, Buber's dialogic perspective serves as a holistic framework for exploring parents' experiences of obstacles with staff. In particular, we contend that dialogue between parents and staff arises in encounters—in Buber's terms, positive I-Thou relationships—when parents feel they have been heard in cases concerning their children.

Methodology

Empirical Data

In the Finnish educational system, pre-primary education for 6-year-olds has been obligatory since 2015 (Legislative Amendment to the Basic Education Act, 1040/2014). For present purposes, data were gathered on parental involvement in the local pre-primary curriculum planning process during the 2015–2016 school year in a city in northern Finland. The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016) and the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018) emphasize parental involvement in the planning, execution, and evaluation of pre-primary education.

In 2015 city's Early Childhood Education (ECE) planner and Early Childhood Education (ECE) director emailed an invitation to all parents of children then in pre-primary education, encouraging them to participate in planning in so-called "curriculum cafés". These discussion group meetings for volunteer parents were held three times during the planning process. During these events, parents commented on the content of National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education 2016) and offered their views on the local curriculum.

During the meetings, the participating parents ($n = 15$) sat around tables in four groups. The researcher (first author) placed a recording device on each table. The group discussions addressed topics and questions about the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (2014), which were devised by the ECE planner and ECE director. As the parents discussed these topics and questions in their groups, the researcher moved among them to listen, observe, and record, but she did not take part. The parents seemed to trust the researcher, and her presence did not seem to disturb their discussions. The

parents understood that the researcher was interested in their experiences in pre-primary education and was not advancing her own views in this regard.

The parents met twice in the autumn term and once in the spring term. Each meeting was recorded and lasted approximately three hours. The topics included the future implications of education, the content of learning, and areas of transversal competence in the pre-primary education curriculum. The parents also discussed their cooperation with pre-primary staff and their desire to participate in their children's education.

The present study focuses on the data from the last curriculum café meeting because its theme was cooperation among parents and staff. During the whole curriculum planning process parental participation decreased and in the last meeting there were five parents present. The theme of cooperation also occasionally emerged in other curriculum café meetings, so we analyzed all the data first. Of the parents (13 mothers and 2 fathers) who participated in the curriculum cafés, most were around 40 years old and worked in the field of teaching and education.

Following the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019), ethical issues were taken into account throughout the research process. The parents were informed about the study during the first cafe meeting. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained orally from every parent. The parents could withdraw at any time during the study. On each occasion, permission was sought to record the parents' group discussions. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym when the interview data were transcribed. It needs to be mentioned that the researchers did not choose the group of parents as they had been selected for the local curriculum planning process. In this study, a limitation of the data seems to be that all the parents were working in the field of teaching and education. On the other hand, they were talking as parents and about their children. As researchers we are conscious of this and its impact on the results (see also Eecera Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers 2015).

Phenomenological Analysis

The aim of the present study was to understand what kinds of obstacles the parents experienced during encounters with the staff, as expressed during the curriculum café meetings. To that end, we utilized Giorgi's (1994) phenomenological methodology to analyze the parents' experiences. Phenomenology explores the ways in which the world appears in the individual's experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1947/2007). Through phenomenological reduction, researchers try to examine the data as open-mindedly as possible, allowing informants' experiences to emerge as they experienced them (Husserl, 1995).

The phenomenological approach to research involves a series of self-critical questions, requiring informants—in this case, parents—to pause and reflect on their experiential world. Although many of the participating parents reported similar experiences of Finnish pre-primary education, the purpose of the study was not to produce generalizable findings. Rather, as discussed in the Results section, these similarities were viewed as experiential condensations (Giorgi, 1994; Perttula, 2005). Ulvinen (2012) explained that as empirical research seeks to access the everyday world and personal experiences, the validity of that research is enhanced when researchers have first-hand experience of that everyday world. Only later can material from everyday life be assigned to the theoretical models it describes. The following Table 1 describes our analysis process.

TABLE 1 Steps of analysis

<i>STEP OF ANALYSIS</i>	<i>ACTION OF RESEARCHERS</i>	<i>GOAL OF THE ANALYSIS</i>	<i>RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS</i>
1. Step	Read the data open-minded and by reduction, from the full dataset (40 pages)	To get the whole picture of the data, from the full dataset (40 pages)	The parents experiences in the pre- primary education, from the full dataset (40 pages)
2. Step	Focus on parent's experiences	To identify parent's experiences	Parents experiences of cooperation with staff and parents
3. Step	Focus on identifying themes of cooperation	Encounters between staff and parents	Themes: daily encounters, parents' involvement and the use of technology
4. Step	Focus on understanding encounters (10 pages)	Parents' experiences about obstacles (10 pages)	Obstacles between staff and parents (10 pages)
5. Step	Applying Martin Buber's framework	The experiences of multidimensional obstacles	Power relations, lack of time and resources

The starting point for the present research was Giorgi's (1994) phenomenological psychology. Using this method, our analysis of the data involved five steps (see Table 1). To begin, the discussion data were transcribed verbatim, producing 40 pages of text. The researchers then read the material openly, alternately, and separately to identify passages in which the parents described their experiences of daily pre-primary education activities. The second phase of analysis focused on how the parents constructed their experiences. Adopting a data-centered approach, the researchers made no attempt to define the material in advance (for example, by dividing it into categories), seeking instead to approach the data without preconceptions.

In the third phase of this phenomenological analysis, we found that although the parents discussed all the content of the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016) in the curriculum cafés, the experiences they described placed greater emphasis on their encounters with staff. These accounts frequently described interactions with pre-primary school staff, including daily discussions when dropping off and collecting their children, as well as their suggestions for activities and practices, their participation in pre-primary education, their use of technological devices and apps, and information sharing and feedback. The issues that emerged from the parents' discussions were grouped into themes, including daily encounters, parents' involvement in pre-primary education, and the use of technology for communication and feedback.

In the fourth phase of the analysis, the researchers discussed the kinds of interaction with pre-primary education staff as experienced by the parents, which highlighted the obstacles to those interactions. On that basis, we decided to highlight the theme of obstacles to interactions between parents and staff. The theme of the last group discussion was cooperation among the parents and staff. This discussion data were 10 pages out of the whole 40 pages data.

In the fifth phase of analysis, we applied Buber's (1923/1987; 1947/2002) framework to make sense of the complicated multidimensional interactions between parents and staff. By analyzing what the parents said about their experiences, we sought to access those features of their experiential worlds that the parents could articulate by talking. We concluded that the most important and frequently repeated topic was the parent-staff encounter, which we then explored in greater depth from a Buberian perspective. This led us to focus on parents' experiences of unsuccessful encounters and these themes were power relations between parents and staff and lack of time and resources. In the following section we describe how the parents experienced these phenomena.

Findings

In applying Buber's (1923/1987; 1947/2002) dialogic philosophy to explore what might underlie these unsuccessful encounters, we were particularly interested in the following question: *What obstacles to encounters with staff do parents experience?* In this section, we describe the kinds of obstacle that parents experienced in their everyday encounters with staff in a pre-primary school context. Using Giorgi's (1994) phenomenological psychology, the key obstacles were identified as *power relations between parents and staff* and *lack of time and resources*.

Encounters Linked to Power Relations

Our findings indicate first that parents felt they had fewer opportunities than they would have liked to participate in the daily pedagogical practices and planning of their children's pre-primary education. One mother (Liisa) described the ambivalent situation as follows.

...like how I've experienced the staff of the kindergarten's and pre-primary, they are really enthusiastic about doing things they like. And when you suggest something else, we don't know how to and so on. So, really quickly, there's this wall. It's really nice that there's this passion for something they know well, like crafts, but I've often felt that if I were to suggest some craft I've found, they might say "Well, none of us has ever done this type of thing," and that would make me feel sorry for even suggesting it. They have really nice staff—they are wonderful people who are excited and do things, but when you suggest something, it's always like "We'll think about it" or "Hmm." I don't know if it's just the staff, their personality, but I always feel like I haven't suggested anything in a long time because it makes me feel like that.

This excerpt illustrates a first manifestation of power. While acknowledging the staff's skills, this mother (Liisa) described how they ignored her ideas about pedagogical practices. This seemed to make her unhappy and caused her to stop suggesting new ideas or alternative pedagogical practices. Liisa also felt that, in making suggestions, she had ventured into an area where her ideas were not regarded (Venninen et. al., 2013; Venninen & Purola, 2013). In her experience, she found herself apologizing for her involvement and suggestions, and the staff did not appear to appreciate her enthusiasm for introducing new ideas. Moreover, the dialogue between mother and staff seemed weak, as she could not freely express her thoughts, experiences, hopes, and perceptions.

From a Buberian dialogical perspective (1924/1987; 1947/2002), Liisa's account points to an I-It relationship between parent and staff. Where the parent experiences herself/himself as a functional role rather than as a feeling, sensitive person, no dialogical relationship develops. Dialogical encounters depend on an attitude of sincerity, with no set objectives or foreknowledge. Similarly, I-Thou relationships require openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. In short, dialogical encounters between parents and staff become possible only when they have an open relationship.

A second manifestation of power in this context related to the working culture in pre-primary education. In the following excerpt, another mother (Anna) notes that parents' suggestions could also cause staff to feel confused and subject to evaluation.

I feel the people working with this child are really proud of what they're doing—this professional pride, like "This what we do here, we do it well." And that makes you

feel “I don’t want to insult you in any way, but have you thought about doing it this way?” And they take that as if I’m pushing to guide them.

In this excerpt, Anna seems to suggest that she felt she was not welcome to join in pedagogical planning, execution, and evaluation. In her experience, there seemed to be “an invisible curtain” between her and the staff, preventing her from participating in the daily pedagogical activities or advancing “from the lobby into the other rooms” (Kyrönlampi & Karikoski, 2017). The working culture, values, and norms of pre-primary education seemed to hinder equality, limiting parents’ ability to interact and engage with the staff (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2008). Previous research (e.g., Devjak et al., 2009; Vandebroek et al., 2016) has demonstrated that pre-primary education is part of an institutional system that ensures staff autonomy but assigns no active role or status to parents.

In the excerpt above, Anna felt that the staff declined her suggestions because of a sense of professionalism among pre-primary teachers, and because they viewed her suggestions as an evaluation of their professional skills. According to Venninen and Purola (2013), staff indicated that parents could not participate in planning pedagogical activities. In the present case, Anna wanted to contribute to pedagogical planning and execution of the pre-primary school’s activities and program, but one apparent obstacle was that the pre-primary school’s cultural structures did not accommodate parents’ wishes or dialogical encounters. Communication between Anna and the teachers seemed to break down when she made suggestions about educational content; in short, the relationship between mother and staff seemed asymmetrical and unequal.

In contrast, I-Thou relationships are based on equity, trust, openness, and respect. According to one father (Pekka), it was important for staff to listen to parents and to treat them as professionals because the home is the most important environment for growth.

The staff should know how to listen to parents because parents are the ones who spend the rest of the day with the children. ... Parents also have a home and like the child to be flexible, in every sense. But to make it work like that, staff must not see it as giving advice or anything personal but [would have] to be more open about it.

In this example, Pekka stressed that it was important for staff to take proper account of parents’ knowledge, skills, and experience of their own children. He also wanted staff to work respectfully with families, and he longed for equal encounters (see also Alasuutari, 2011; Karikoski, 2008; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012; Turunen, 2013; Venninen et al., 2011). Pekka emphasized that it was important for children’s well-being that the staff listened to parents’ views about their own children. Other studies (e.g., Lastikka &

Lipponen, 2016) have also reported that parents felt that good cooperation with pre-primary staff had a positive effect on their children's well-being.

On the other hand, some parents noted a change in the pre-primary education culture since their own time in day care as a child. According to one mother (Kaarina), "Ten years ago, they would not ask much from the parents." She considered it positive that the culture of pre-primary education had changed in a more open and conversational direction, and she felt it was important that staff listened to her opinions and thoughts about her child. However, a father (Antti) acknowledged that cooperation with parents can be challenging from a staff perspective.

...but it has also changed since my own time in the day care center. We had there then many parents who participated in voluntary works and parent` meetings. But now we can see those parents` meetings so there are always we, the same and a few families.

In this excerpt, Antti sympathizes with the challenges and diversity of cooperation and expresses the view that parents also share responsibility for building a dialogical I-Thou relationship. Looking back to his own day care years, he recognized a change in culture. In Venninen et al. (2011, 37-38), early childhood educators also noted the same phenomenon. In that study, educators felt that parents were not interested or motivated to participate in matters related to the day care center's activities.

In this study, parents experienced asymmetrical power relationships as an obstacle to encounters with staff, who seemed disinterested in their views about their own children. The parents hoped they would be viewed as equal partners in their children's growth, development, and learning, and that their experience as parents would be taken seriously in planning pedagogical activities. In the present case, this suggests that parents recognized the lack of I-Thou dialogical relationships and hoped for more dialogical discussions with staff (Buber, 1923/1987; 1947/2002).

Encounters Linked to Time and Resources

Liisa identified limited time and staff resources as another obstacle. In the following excerpt, she describes how haste and a lack of time prevented collaborative work and encounters.

Obviously, it's very important to have this moment, just once in a term. Something like a short parents' moment with the teacher—time to just talk with the child's own teacher, to just talk about how it's going, and to exchange and catch up on little daily things. But they are important, discussions of this kind, the feedback. When you take child there in the mornings, and you're busy; when you pick the child up in the

afternoon, there are like ten other parents, and then it's just "I'll take the child, and bye until tomorrow".

In the worst case, parents missed encounters with staff and did not know how their children's school day had gone. As Pekka explained, "Personally, I was thinking that I don't really know much about what happens there during the day." Liisa was concerned whether she knew enough about her own children's daily routines and actions. She was interested in pedagogical activities during her children's day and hoped for more active, spontaneous encounters; so far, any discussion had been confined to brief daily interactions and pre-organized pedagogical discussions twice a year. As Liisa said, parents need "time for just talking with the child's own teacher." Our findings suggest that parents felt that encounters were successful when they received information about their children's daily activities and routines.

Both Liisa and Pekka experienced not hearing or knowing about their children's daily affairs as obstacles to encounters. Both excerpts illustrate the importance that parents attach to knowing about the everyday life and rhythm of the school day. The parents found the biannual meetings (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016) about their children's individual education plans insufficient, and encounters between parents and staff did not seem to occur during these meetings. In addition, Liisa wanted more time for face-to-face meetings with teachers. This aligns with Mäntyjärvi and Puroila (2019), who also found that daily interactions were often quite hasty and might not allow sufficient time for parent-staff encounters.

Liisa understood that co-operation in pre-primary education meant regular feedback through daily, face-to-face interactions and electronic communication, using social media and photographs to keep parents informed about daily activities. Knowing more about these activities would also enable parents to participate.

For example, when possible, I pick my child up from preschool myself, so I am always there at the same time as about five or six other parents. The teacher says "Hi, she has eaten, and we went outside. Until tomorrow." So it is so quick, and I'm a little bit the kind of personality that I leave if there is someone who has something to say—some other parent—even if I have something to say. So, for example, electronic communication is [better] for the parent who steps aside. I find it such an unpleasant situation that I stay aside and wait my turn to get my child. I am waiting here, sweating, with a heavy coat on, waiting still, and then the staff come to say goodbye. So, it is not the best moment to give feedback.

Virtual encounters through electronic communication can facilitate cooperation and links between home and preschool. In the above excerpt, Liisa says she did not want to be

bothered when several parents were picking up their children at the same time, as encounters between parents and staff should be personal and individual. Instead, as Liisa felt that the staff were too busy to discuss matters related to her children, she withdrew and decided to wait for a more appropriate time. Unhurried daily encounters between parents and staff seem important; according to Pekka, busy and brief daily encounters run the risk of conveying only negative news.

I really don't know much about what is happening there during the day. ... Following the pre-primary school day continuously would be more reasonable than waiting for just 15 minutes for a discussion. There's a danger that positive things are being missed somewhere.

These parents' accounts revealed that scheduled discussions were not enough to create encounters, and that there was a need for daily encounters to address each child's personal affairs. In addition, the parents were concerned that daily meetings allowed no time to talk about their children's progress. The philosopher Värri (2002) wrote about the concept of "underground dialogue," in which the parent-child relationship is so strong and powerful that the parent thinks about the child, for example, during their working day and wants to know what goes on and how the child feels during the preschool day. For all these reasons, encounters seem best conducted in an open, unhurried way.

Discussion

The study findings indicate that most of the encounters between parents and staff could be characterized as I-It relationships (Buber, 1924/1987; 1947/2007), in which staff should engage and get along with parents. Instead, parents felt that staff often acted as if "above" parents. These results may reflect our particular interest in the obstacles to parent-staff encounters. Buber's dialogic philosophy centers on the question of how to encounter otherness. This presupposes dialogue, and a dialogical relationship between parents and teachers depends on mutual trust and respect.

The parents expressed a desire for more openness and transparency in relation to everyday school activities. The nature of collaborative practices and activities reveals the quality of dialogic relationships in the pre-primary education environment (Buber 1924/1987; 1942/2007). In this case, the parents suggested how dialogue with staff might be established on a day-to-day basis. The parents expressed positive attitudes toward co-operation and interaction with staff. To build I-Thou relationships with parents, staff must adopt a family-friendly orientation, making time and a place to engage

in dialogue. Clearly, this I–Thou dialogical relationship also depends on parents' willingness to cooperate with staff.

Cooperation with parents is a multidimensional phenomenon, and the parents in this study acknowledged that they were also responsible for ensuring cooperation. The obstacles to cooperation seemed to resemble being on a seesaw. The development of an I–Thou relationship between parent and staff requires different forms of cooperation that can accommodate diverse family situations. For some parents, it is enough to hear about the daily activities in school; others would like to play a more active role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of pedagogical activities.

Pre-primary school parents and staff share a focus on the children, and both need open dialogue to ensure effective encounters. In that way, parents and staff acquire new and different experiences and extend their understanding of the children and the role of pre-primary education in their daily life. In this study, it was important to hear about the parents' encounters with staff and to articulate their thoughts and perceptions about facilitating equal collaboration. In everyday life, hearing the parents requires a dialogue that is equal, confidential, and open, where staff encounter parents in I–Thou relationships. Our findings confirm that such relationships support dialogic interactions in which staff exhibit a desire to meet and listen to parents. Establishing a respectful, confidential relationship is important in avoiding obstacles to cooperation (Buber 1924/1987; 1947/2002). In this study, parents felt that staff had the primary responsibility for the encounter with parents, and parents' position seemed to depend on staff attitudes. It was considered important to make space and time for encounters with staff within the day-to-day structure of pre-primary education.

Most of those who volunteered for the curriculum cafes were highly educated mothers, and this select group may have influenced the findings: Perhaps they have cultural resources and previous knowledge about Finnish curriculum contents. In addition, the small sample size means that the findings cannot be generalized. Group discussion data tend to reflect the shared thoughts or views of the participants' subculture. Group discussion may have discouraged talk about private matters. On the other hand, group discussion may have made it easier to articulate personal experiences as members became acquainted with each other during the meetings.

It is important to note that our research design did not fully address the dialogical relationship, as obstacles were described only from the parents' perspective. Future research should therefore explore staff experiences of encounters with parents. Additionally, according to Giorgi (1994) and Perttula (2005), researchers are inevitably influenced to some extent by their own experiences, knowledge, and skills. For that

reason, the researchers made every effort to remain sensitive and open to the research material and data in trying to identify obstacles to cooperation from the parents' perspective. During all phases of the research process from data gathering to analysis and reporting, we were also careful to take account of ethical issues.

The study findings help to inform cooperation between pre-primary school staff and parents. For many parents, it seems meaningful to lower the threshold for participation in developmental work in the familiar environment of the pre-primary school. The work culture could be developed by involving parents in pedagogical planning, implementation, and evaluation. The quality of discussion between staff and parents can be developed by building dialogical relationships, and the study results indicate that parents may be willing to engage in I–Thou dialogue with staff.

As well as identifying some of the obstacles to encounters between parents and staff, the study also indicates good practices for cooperation. In the everyday life of pre-primary school and ECE more broadly, it seems fruitful to reflect on and develop more diverse cooperation practices that take account of diverse family life situations. More research is also needed to clarify obstacles to cooperation from staff and child perspectives; for example, how do children perceive the dialogue between adults and children and between children themselves in the pre-primary school context?

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