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Constructing Closeness in Educational Collaboration in Extended Hours ECEC

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Abstract

Although quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and strong collaborations between families and ECEC educators are important for all children, they may be particularly important for children and families who utilize nighttime or weekend ECEC. This study focuses on ECEC educators' discourses about closeness versus distance in educational collaborations between parents with nonstandard schedules and professionals who work in extended hours ECEC. The data for this study were collected by interviewing ECEC teachers ($n = 12$) and nurses ($n = 18$) working in Finland. *Research findings:* Using the principles of discourse analysis, we found three tensional discourses: (a) the timing of ECEC and asynchrony; (b) a sense of time versus hurry; and (c) care versus criticism. *Practice and policy:* The findings revealed that extended hours ECEC provides both challenges and possibilities for creating close educational collaboration with parents. This has important implications for the kinds of structural supports and training educators in extended hours ECEC may need to foster quality collaboration with families.

Keywords Early childhood education and care · Early care and education · Educational collaboration · Educational partnerships · Extended hours early childhood education and care · Discourse analysis · Nonstandard childcare · Nonstandard work hours

High-quality partnerships between early childhood education and care (ECEC) educators and families are associated with children's socioemotional well-being and learning (e.g., Koivula et al., 2023; Lang et al., 2020) and benefit parents and educators (e.g., Clarke et al., 2010; Corso, 2007). A high-quality parent–educator relationship is typically described as a respectful, responsive, and reciprocal relationship built over time and includes listening to and affirmation of one another (Corso, 2007; Lang et al., 2016; Rautamies et al., 2021). On the contrary, low-quality parent–educator relationships are described as distant, with distrust and conflict between educators and parents (Lang et al., 2016; Rautamies et al., 2021). Emerging research has

indicated that strong educational partnerships may be even more important for families working nonstandard schedules (e.g., early morning, late evenings, nights, and weekends) (Koivula et al., 2023; Rönkä et al., 2019).

In this study, we adopt a discourse-analytical approach to educational partnerships. Thus, our research is grounded in socioconstructionism, such that the discourses and language used relative to educational partnerships reflect cultural ways of understanding collaborations between families and ECEC, not solely personal cognition (Burr, 2003). By applying this theoretical lens, we understand that participants' discourses are formed through interactions between individuals and their environments. Therefore, what a person perceives as “truth” is shaped by social processes and their interactions rather than by objective observation (Burr, 2015). Analytically, we focus on discursive tensions, or ways of talking, in which opposing contradictions occur (Potter, 2012). Previous research (Alasuutari, 2010; Einarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2019; Råde, 2020; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017) has revealed tensional discourses regarding educational partnerships, such as calling these relationships collaborations versus partnerships, and regarding professional-centered

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versus family-centered approaches, which highlights the expertise of educators versus parents in these relationships.

In the next section, we introduce the context of this study: Finnish extended hours ECEC. This is followed by a literature review on discursive tensions related to educational partnerships. Finally, we present our theoretical lenses on closeness in educational partnerships and outline our research questions.

Finnish Extended Hours ECEC as the Context of this Study

In Finland, all children under 7 years of age have access not only to ECEC services but also to ECEC with extended operating hours when their parents work or attend school during nonstandard hours (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). Typically, ECEC centers in Finland are open from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, while extended hours ECEC centers are open either 24/7 or from early morning until late evening. Within the Finnish labor market, more than one-third of employees work during nonstandard hours (Eurostat, 2024), while approximately 7% of children enrolled in ECEC participate in extended hours care (Rönkä et al., 2019). All municipalities in Finland are obliged to provide these services according to parents' work or study schedules (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018) and following the same laws and regulations as regular hours ECEC centers.

Finnish centers use multiprofessional teams to provide care and education (Karila & Kupila, 2023). These teams combine the expertise of (a) teachers with bachelor's or master's degrees from universities or universities of applied sciences and (b) ECEC nurses (e.g., child carers) with secondary-level education and three years of post-secondary training in social welfare and healthcare with a focus on early childhood. Teachers are responsible for the implementation of ECEC pedagogy and collaboration with parents, but in daily work, they share these responsibilities with ECEC nurses. Teachers typically work during the daytime from Monday to Friday in these settings, while nurses may work throughout the operating hours without teachers' presence and act as active providers of pedagogical activities (Peltoperä et al., 2023; Peltoperä & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2023) and collaborate with parents during extended hours (early mornings, late evenings, nights, and weekends). In this paper, we use the term educators when referring to both teachers and nurses.

There may be factors of extended hours ECEC that support the construction of close partnerships with families. There are typically fewer children attending ECEC during nonstandard hours compared to standard hours, meaning

that there may be more time and space for building closer relationships with children and parents (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Salonen, 2020). Recent research (Peltoperä et al., 2022; Salonen, 2020) has conceptualized Finnish institutional extended hours ECEC as more home-like than standard hours ECEC. This suggests that it serves as a platform on which public and private times intersect (Siippainen et al., 2023). In this setting, educators undertake responsibilities typically associated with parental duties, such as late evening and nighttime care.

However, ECEC provided during nonstandard hours tends to have a negative stigma in societies (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Peltoperä et al., 2018; Statham & Mooney, 2003), as it diverges from the cultural norms of caring for (the youngest) children at home during nights and weekends (Peltoperä & Moilanen, 2024). Educators sometimes struggle to understand, respect, and provide support to parents who work nonstandard hours (Rönkä et al., 2019). Educators' choice of language may inadvertently shape a negative social perception of nonstandard work and childcare (Burr, 2003).

In the context of extended hours ECEC, both parents and educators work irregular hours, and more staff are needed to cover the center's operating hours than in ECEC with standard operating hours (De Schipper et al., 2003; Peltoperä et al., 2022). Although some elements of extended hours ECEC may enhance closeness, building close relationships between parents and educators can be challenging in these settings. Due to nonstandard hour schedule constraints, there can potentially be insufficient time and space for the individual conversations necessary to build high-quality partnerships, since high-quality relationships require dedicated time and space for individual conversations (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Corso, 2007). In addition, there is greater diversity among families who attend extended hours ECEC, including a higher number of single parents than in standard hours ECEC (see Moilanen et al., 2019; Rönkä et al., 2019), because in two-parent families, both parents must work nonstandard hours to warrant a space in extended hours ECEC. Although a recent study (Koivula et al., 2023) indicated that high-quality collaboration between parents and educators may mitigate the potential negative impact of parental nonstandard working hours and irregular family rhythms on child well-being, there is a lack of research on how educators construct these partnerships in extended hours ECEC.

Educational Collaboration and its Discursive Tensions

Two concepts are used in discourses about parent–educator collaboration: *educational partnership* (Rouse & O’Brien, 2017) and *collaboration* (Alasuutari, 2010; Einarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). Whereas the concept of educational partnership refers to the equality and closeness of partners (Alasuutari, 2010), the term collaboration is more neutral and can convey a more professional and potentially distant connection that is more akin to professional–client relationships in institutional contexts (Alasuutari, 2010; Einarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). The Finnish ECEC curriculum has shifted its focus from the concept of educational partnership (Stakes, 2013) to *collaboration with parents* (FNAE, 2022) due to critics arguing that “partnership” suggests more personal, intimate, or informal relationships (Alasuutari, 2010). However, collaboration with parents in the context of extended hours ECEC calls for equal and close relationships between the partners (see Rouse & O’Brien, 2017), as it includes collaboration during “sensitive times,” such as early mornings, evenings, nights, and weekends (Salonen et al., 2018).

There are also tensions between family-centered and professional-centered collaboration (Alasuutari, 2010; Dunst, 2002), and these two ways of collaborating with families can include different values, goals, and relational and participatory components (see Dunst, 2002). Professional-centered practices stress the expertise and activities of ECEC educators in collaboration, constructing an unequal understanding of the partnership (Alasuutari, 2010). In contrast, family-centered practices value parents’ expertise and place parents as the most important decision-makers in a child’s life, stressing the idea of working together in the service of the child (Dunst, 2002) and presenting a more equal discourse regarding educational partnerships. Family-centered discourse includes the idea of endorsement and the encouragement of parents’ caregiving (Lang et al., 2016), viewing parents from different backgrounds as autonomous and competent agents and experts on their own children (Forry et al., 2012). We do not yet know how these discourses take form in educators’ discourses about their collaborations with parents, ultimately constructing closeness versus distance in these relationships.

Two frameworks have been identified in parent–educator relationships in Finnish early educators’ discourses: horizontal and vertical (Alasuutari, 2010). The horizontal framework is characterized by parallel expertise, recognizing both educators and parents as experts in the relationship and equal contributors to its goals (Råde, 2020). Conversely, educators’ expertise and role in directing educational collaborations characterizes vertical relationships—that is, where the

educator’s knowledge and power are privileged (Alasuutari, 2010; Råde, 2020). Equality of the partners, which is typical in horizontal parent–professional relationships, can be seen as a starting point for reciprocal and mutually respectful parent–educator partnerships (Rouse & O’Brien, 2017). However, ECEC educators can view equality and closeness between partners as challenging due to their expertise and professionalism (Alasuutari, 2010). Research has suggested that educators’ positive attitudes and their willingness to work for the benefit of parents and their children promote parental trust and closeness (Clarke et al., 2010; Rautamies et al., 2021). Lang et al. (2016, 2020) identified support, agreement, and communication as key dimensions of high-quality educational partnerships. Support, which includes feeling encouragement, trust, and comfort in parent–educator partnerships (and expressed in educators’ discourses), reflects closeness in this relationship (Lang et al., 2016).

In turn, a lack of support and the presence of undermining, which includes suspicion and criticism of the parents and/or the child, promote distrust and distance in educational relationships (Rautamies et al., 2021; see Lang et al., 2016). Negative attitudes, then, can lead to distrust and emotional distance in parent–educator relationships, which may also affect children’s experiences of the relational distance between educators and parents (Lang et al., 2020; Søre et al., 2023). Despite both partners contributing to building relational trust (Edwards, 2005), ECEC educators play a primary role and have responsibility in this arena, as articulated in the Finnish curricula (FNAE, 2022). Thus, in this paper, we focus on educators’ discourses about these partnerships to understand how this reality is coconstructed among educators and with parents using extended hours ECEC.

Closeness in Previous Studies on Parent–Educator Relationships

Although understudied in previous research, the closeness versus distance between partners in parent–educator relationships, as outlined above, likely plays a critical role in how well parents and educators are able to work together in support of children’s well-being across home and ECEC contexts. That said, trust is a concept that has repeatedly surfaced in the literature on parent–educator partnerships (Clarke et al., 2010; Keen, 2007; Rautamies et al., 2021) and can be viewed as a subcomponent necessary to form closeness and avoidance distance in these partnerships. Trust is important in parent–educator relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Clarke et al., 2010) so that both parties can openly share information, strengths, and challenges and collaborate on the best ways to support the focal child (Forry et al., 2012). Trust may be even more critical when working

with parents who work nonstandard hours since extended hours ECEC has been labeled as home-like and extended hours as “sensitive times” in previous research (Peltoperä & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2023; Peltoperä et al., 2018; Salonen et al., 2018). In these settings, educators become responsible for the care routines and social networks that are typically conceptualized within the family domain (Siippainen et al., 2023), such as the safe sleep routines of children at ECEC centers, evening meals, and the continuity of (peer) relationships (Salonen, 2020).

ECEC educators’ sensitivity toward and understanding of the needs of children, as perceived by parents (Rutanen & Laaksonen, 2020), and personal regard for the other partner, reflecting care (Minke, 2006), are seen as key aspects of trust within these partnerships. The emphasis on nurturance, caring, and supportiveness in this research area is reflective of closeness in parent–educator relationships (e.g., Forry et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2016, 2020). Some research on older children has specifically called attention to the concept of closeness in parent–educator partnerships. For example, a study conducted in school contexts (Lasky & Moore, 2000) highlighted educators’ sense of moral purpose and notions of caring and professionalism as important for closeness in parent–educator relationships. However, studies focusing on closeness in ECEC contexts are lacking, despite the call for intimacy and caring in educational partnerships (Alasuutari, 2010), especially in the context of nonstandard care (Salonen et al., 2018).

To the best of our knowledge, the viewpoint of closeness is a neglected topic in the literature on educational collaboration in general, but it is especially so in the study of extended hours ECEC. To address this gap, we sought the perspectives of those working in extended-hour programs to examine how these educational collaborations are understood and enacted between educators and families. Using social constructionism as our theoretical approach, which posits that people create, maintain, and change social realities in their discourses (Burr, 2003), we examine the way educators discuss their educational partnerships in this setting. Considering the special features of extended hours ECEC, we focus on educators’ discourses from the viewpoint of constructing closeness versus distance in educational partnerships. To render this visible, we explore the following research question:

How do ECEC teachers and nurses construct closeness versus distance in collaboration with parents in extended hours ECEC in their language use?

Methods

Participants

The data for this study were collected by interviewing ECEC teachers ($n = 12$) and ECEC nurses ($n = 19$) working in extended hours ECEC across 13 centers (see Table 1). The participants were from 11 public and two private ECEC centers from different-sized municipalities in Finland. Nine of these centers provided ECEC around the clock throughout the year; three centers operated from approximately 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, and one operated from 5.45 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. All of these settings are referred to as extended hours ECEC in this paper, and all participants worked in these settings. All the teachers adhered to more standard working hours, which were between 5.30 a.m. and 6 p.m., while the ECEC nurses also provided coverage during nonstandard hours (evenings as well as nights and weekends, if working in 24/7 settings). One participant was male, and the rest were female. To protect the male participant’s anonymity, we have not included this information in the table of participants. The mean length of work experience in extended hours ECEC was 10 years, and the range was from 1 year to 35 years.

Data Collection

The participants were recruited as part of a research project on ‘Children’s socio-emotional well-being and daily family life in a 24 h economy’ (Families 24/7). The researchers of the project contacted educators through their workplaces and invited them to respond to a web-based survey through which they could express their willingness to be interviewed. Subsequently, the researchers called the ECEC centers to arrange the interviews, which were carried out in the educators’ workplaces. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted by the first author of this publication, and the others were conducted by other Families 24/7 research group members. All interviewers were trained in semi-structured thematic interviews (Patton, 2002).

The interview questions were planned by the Families 24/7 research group and organized around the topics of extended hours ECEC as a societal service, child well-being, pedagogical practices, daily activities, work schedules, and communication among educators, children, and parents. The interviews included questions such as: “How do you collaborate with parents in your ECEC unit?” “Can you share some good practices, especially for extended hours ECEC?” “Is there something you find difficult in communication with parents?” and “Have you felt the need for support in collaboration?” The same set of questions was used in all interviews; however, it was considered important

Table 1 Information about the participants

ECEC centre	Public/private	Operating hours	Area of the center	Occupation **	Experience (in years) in ECEC/extended hours ECEC	Working hours
1	Private	24/7	Suburban	Nurse	3/2	5.30 a.m.–10.30 p.m.
2	Public	24/7	Urban	Nurse Teacher	6/2 10/5	All shifts Day shifts
3	Public	24/7	Suburban	Nurse Nurse Teacher (A) Teacher	*/35 */15 */25 12/10	All shifts All shifts 5.30 a.m.–6.00 p.m. 5.30 a.m.–6.00 p.m.
4	Public	24/7	Urban	Teacher (B)	11/1	Day shifts
5	Public	5 a.m.–10.30 p.m. Monday–Friday	Suburban	Nurse Nurse (A)	12/10 18/12	5 a.m.–10.30 p.m. Evening shifts
6	Public	24/7	Suburban	Nurse (B) Nurse (C) Teacher (C)	12/12 11/6 */8	All shifts All shifts 6.30 a.m.–6 p.m.
7	Public	24/7	Suburban	Nurse Nurse (D) Teacher Teacher (D)	*/10 */4 */3 */10	All shifts All shifts Day shifts Day shifts
8	Public	24/7	Urban	Nurse Nurse Teacher (E)	10/5 25/19 3/2	All shifts All shifts 7 a.m.–6 p.m.
9	Private	24/7	Suburban	Nurse Nurse (E) Teacher	7/5 */3 7/2	All shifts All shifts All shifts
10	Public	5 a.m.–10 p.m. Monday–Friday	Suburban	Nurse (F) Nurse (G) Teacher	16/16 42/20 17/*	Early morning and late evening shifts Early morning and late evening shifts day shifts
11	Public	5 a.m.–10 p.m. Monday–Friday	Suburban	Teacher Teacher	23/7 *	7 a.m.–5 p.m. 7 a.m.–5 p.m.
12	Public	5.45 a.m.–10 p.m. Monday–Sunday	Suburban	Nurse Nurse Nurse	14/8 15/15 24/24	All shifts All shifts All shifts
13	Public	24/7	Urban	Nurse (H)	25/25	All shifts

*Missing information; ** Letters identify participants in data extracts

to let the interviews take place in the form of a conversation as much as possible to enable authenticity and variation of discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Both ECEC teachers and nurses, despite their varying working hours, were asked the same questions to gather their views on the topics of interest. Although teachers do not typically work nights or weekends, they work with children and meet parents during their standard-hours shifts. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 1 h, although the longest lasted almost two hours. The interview data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in Finnish. The data extracts used in this paper were translated into English by the first two authors.

Analysis

The data analysis started by completing multiple readings of the transcribed data and focusing on all the data excerpts in which educators discussed educational partnerships with parents in relation to parental nonstandard working hours and extended hours ECEC. The unit of analysis was a meaningful sentence or several sentences with a specific set of thoughts, which is relevant from the perspective of constructing closeness versus distance in an educational partnership. The data were systematically coded (Patton, 2002) through the lens of two tensional discourses regarding educational partnerships referenced in the introduction:

vertical and horizontal frameworks. The vertical framework included a hierarchy of the roles of the partners, with one having more knowledge or authority, while the horizontal framework included the intimacy or closeness of the partners, whereby more equal power was implied. We extracted educators' discourses that reflected the hierarchy (symmetry/asymmetry) and the distance versus closeness of the partners. After inductively categorizing the data, five themes were identified: the timing of ECEC and discourses on hurry, share of expertise, best interest of the child versus the parent, and building trust. Each text extract was assigned to one of these themes. As noted below, after further analysis, the latter three themes were combined under the discourse of "care versus criticism".

As we delved deeper into these themes, we specifically applied discursive analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to explore the nuances of discussions related to closeness and distance within educational partnerships. In the next analytical step, we employed the concept of discourse (drawing from Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Potter, 2012). Our analysis of the language shared revealed that the discourses were tensional (Burr, 2003), meaning that educators shared concepts or ideas that simultaneously appeared to contradict or counter one another, indicating both closeness and distance in educational partnerships. The final categorization and construction of the tensional discourses were performed by comparing the initial categories with the original data extracts to confirm our interpretations of the data. During the phase of forming tensional discourses, some of the original categories were combined to form three types of tensional discourses expressing the discursive construction of closeness versus distance in educational partnerships. These were (a) the timing of ECEC and asynchrony, (b) a sense of time versus hurry, and (c) care versus criticism.

Throughout the analytical process, we ensured the trustworthiness of our findings by employing validation techniques inspired by Potter and Wetherell (1987). The validation of the interpretations of the data included researcher triangulation (see Creswell & Miller, 2000), meaning examining the interpretations of the first two authors on the internal coherence of the emerging categories and discourses.

The first two authors worked separately with the categorized original data (written in Finnish) and discussed the findings. When there was disagreement on the categorizations, we checked the original data and discussed our interpretations to find a consensus. Furthermore, we checked that our interpretations of the data were relative to our research question. Subsequent discussion with the third author helped to further clarify the description of the analysis and the interpretations of the data extracts that were translated into English.

Ethical Considerations

We followed the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity's (TENK's, 2023) to ensure ethical implementation. The participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form to ensure that they knew their participant rights. Voluntary-based participation, the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time, and the assurance of anonymity in all phases of the research project were reemphasized at the beginning of the interviews. Quotations from the interviews were translated by the authors and are used in the Results section to confirm the trustworthiness of the findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). To protect anonymity, we used codes showing the occupation of the educator (ECEC teacher or ECEC nurse) and a letter referring to each interviewee. In addition, following the principles of discursive psychology, we considered educators' discourses as culturally shared discursive tools that could not be attributed solely to an individual educator; instead, their discourses were interpreted as reflecting the wider social context (Burr, 2003; Taylor, 2006).

Findings of the Study

Three tensional discourses to construct closeness and distance in educational partnerships were identified in the data (see Table 2). The first two, *the timing of ECEC and asynchrony* and *a sense of time versus hurry*, relate to the features of nonstandard working hours and extended hours ECEC and the timing when the encounters between educators and

Table 2 Discursive tensions and their link to closeness and distance in educational collaborations

Discursive tension	Main content of the discourse promoting closeness	Main content of the discourse promoting distance
Timing of ECEC and asynchrony	Evenings as times for closer encounters (especially nurses who work nonstandard hours)	Asynchrony between parents and educators (especially teachers who work mainly standard hours)
Sense of time versus hurry	Evenings as unhurried time for encounters with parents Structure for educational discussions and daily encounters	Rush hours for parents and ECEC centers (especially pick-up times between 4.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m.)
Care versus criticism	Stressing the importance of parents' sense of security Understanding parents' needs Accepting differences among parents and relationships	Criticizing parental work, ECEC choices, and loss of parenthood Strong definitions of some parents (young, single) Emphasizing that educators have a better understanding of what is in the child's best interest

parents occur. The last discursive tension, *care versus criticism*, relates to the positions of the partners in an educational collaboration. Below, we introduce the three discursive tensions. Because we provide exemplary quotes, we use the term “educator” to speak for the collective if a particular discourse was pervasive across roles; however, we refer to ECEC teachers or nurses when a theme or tension was represented primarily by a particular role.

Timing of ECEC and Asynchrony

In this discursive tension, the focus is on the meanings given to the timing of ECEC that create both closeness and distance in educational partnerships. Within this discourse, educators blame asynchrony with parents for creating distance in educational partnerships. Due to parents’ nonstandard working hours, at ECEC, they have different rhythms when dropping off and picking up their children that are asynchronous with those of educators. This asynchrony in rhythms was seen to cause distance between educators and parents, as the primary educators may not meet parents on a daily basis, especially in centers that are open 24/7.

Of course, the collaboration with parents culminates in the fact that no matter how often you as a responsible teacher see parents during your shift, it may take a long time; it can take me up to three weeks to meet some parents. (ECEC Teacher A)

Not meeting the parents regularly is due to the asynchrony with the schedules of parents, especially for ECEC teachers who mainly work standard hours in 24/7-hour settings. In addition to the asynchrony between teachers’ and parents’ schedules, the composition of the child group also appeared to have an effect, as there are typically several educators taking care of the children across extended hours, not just the educators named in a specific child group¹. The number of educators working in different shifts leads to inconsistency in terms of who is staffing when, which does not provide parents and educators with enough consistent contact to form good relationships.

¹ In Finnish ECEC, child group composition is defined in law. Each child group can have a maximum of three educators (1–2 teachers, with the rest nurses) and four under-3-year-old children or seven over-3-year-old children (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). This means that each educator typically has a specified child group they are responsible for. However, in extended hours ECEC, there must be more staff, such as educators who work only night or evening shifts. The work shifts can also be divided equally among all educators; thus, teachers typically work during the daytime from Monday through Friday, while nurses may work more during nonstandard hours. In this context, educators working during extended hours in particular get to work with children from different child groups, as the groups are often combined during evenings, nights, and weekends.

Contrary to these challenges related to asynchrony constructing distance in educational partnerships, the timing of extended hours ECEC was often constructed as promoting closeness in partnerships. The varying ECEC times make extended hours ECEC a special context for building partnerships between parents and educators, as mentioned in the following:

I have to say that I get quite close to the families who work nonstandard hours. Their family life is quite vulnerable in that [the hours] cause a lot of changing dynamics in their lives. And when they take children to night care, for example, it is very sensitive for the children and usually for the parents, too. Often, I feel that I get close to families and to the daily lives of families because they often stay and want to talk about things that are not working, or they have problems. (ECEC Nurse C)

In this data extract, the extended hours are constructed as a special time when more details about the child and the daily life of the family can be discussed. In the evenings, even “parents who don’t normally say many words during the day start to talk more about their issues” (ECEC Nurse G). The mention of the sensitivity of extended hours ECEC is framed as promoting closeness with parents, as parents are described as being more open about their family issues. As seen in the data extracts above, ECEC nurses highlighted more possibilities in the evening for supporting closer encounters with parents than teachers. This can be explained by the variation in working hours, as teachers typically work during the daytime, or perhaps by how families using extended hours ECEC engage with ECEC nurses versus teachers. However, during the day, collaborations with parents were described as more “superficial” (ECEC Teacher D) by teachers.

Sense of Time vs. Hurry

In this discursive tension, mentions of hurry seemed to construct distance, whereas mentions of unhurriedness supported closeness in the educational partnership. In the data, there were many descriptions of hurried time. Partnerships with parents who worked nonstandard hours were described as challenging because “they are busier, work shifts, and can’t concentrate on that [collaboration].... They are just happy that their children are taken care of” (ECEC Teacher A). The repetition of the word “they” throughout the data highlights that the described distance in educational partnerships is “their” (i.e., the parents’) fault rather than the fault of “us” (i.e., the educators).

The late afternoon (between 4.30 p.m. and 5 p.m.) was constructed in the data as the worst time to pick up or drop off children from ECEC, as there are several issues at this time that appeared to promote distance in educational partnerships. Here, parents were, again, described as busy: “They are tired and in a hurry to go back home and to run errands” (ECEC Teacher B). However, parents were not the only partner to blame for the hurry and distance; the period from 4.30 p.m. to 5 p.m. was also described as rush hour, when “more parents are at the ECEC center at the same time” (ECEC Nurse F), which made it harder for the educators to pay attention to individual parents. Also, there were descriptions of situations in which educators needed to take care of the child group while simultaneously conflicted by pausing to talk with parents as they “drop off or pick up children in the middle of child group activities, such as nap time” (ECEC Teacher B). Therefore, the sense of hurry in ECEC had to do with conducting several work duties at the same time. This might be problematic in building trusting relationships, as time and space are needed for conversing and connecting with parents individually.

In contrast to this sense of hurry, the sense of unhurried time was also discussed, often with language that compared the structure or feeling of time to more standard ECEC hours. “Maybe we have more time here for unhurried encounters when children are picked up [outside rush hours]. We have time to talk more and longer if the parents need or want to. So we are not so much in a hurry” (ECEC Nurse B). Also, due to typically smaller child groups in the evenings and on weekends, there is more time with each individual child, and it is possible to tell parents about the children’s day in more detail, which was described as “meaningful for parents” (ECEC Teacher E). In this, there is a comparison with regular ECEC, so we can assume that it is the timing of non-standard ECEC that makes unhurried encounters possible. Also, during nonstandard times, parents were described as having more time and flexibility to engage in cooperation, as expressed in the following extract:

Usually, the parents who bring their kids on weekends really care about how the day has been. When it’s the weekend, they have a completely different attitude to it, but weekdays are busier. They are much more relaxed, and they somehow talk in a completely different way. They also have time to stay for a chat in the morning... Maybe they’re a bit more relaxed, and there’s no terrible stress when it’s the weekend. I don’t know if “weekend” is a magic word so that you don’t have to hurry, even if you have work to do. It’s a funny observation that we’ve noticed.” (ECEC Nurse E).

In this extract, weekdays are constructed as busier than weekends. Even though parents are heading to work, they are described here as having a different attitude, meaning that they are not solely rushing for work but have more time for the encounter with the educators. At one ECEC center, these less busy encounters with parents during the weekends were supported by providing parents with morning coffee “so that they can sit there for a while” (ECEC Nurse F) when they drop off the children for the day.

Also, evenings were constructed as a less busy time for the parents, when “several parents stay [a] long time at the ECEC center discussing with the educators, especially when picking up their child during the evening” (ECEC Nurse A). This ECEC nurse shared that the relationships with parents became closer during these evening pickup sessions due to informal discussions and dialogs about difficult topics and emotions. This type of discourse was especially typical of ECEC nurses.

Care vs. Criticism

The data revealed a tension between discussions about addressing parental needs, which promotes closeness, and criticizing parents, which creates distance in the parent–educator relationship. The following extract reflects care in educators’ discourses and emphasizes the importance of educators in supporting parents’ feelings of security in the parent–educator relationship:

We try to act so that the parents and the children can feel safe and secure... and cordially welcomed... and that they can feel they are the most important persons for us now... The first impression is that it is the starting point. After that, we will provide time for getting to know the daycare center. We will provide time for that. (ECEC Nurse B)

The first contact with parents and children was construed as important for building close relationships. The parents and the children “feeling secure” and being “cordially welcomed” were constructed as the starting point for the parent–educator relationship, which the teachers described as a close relationship with reciprocal interactions. Also, willingness to “understand each parent individually” (ECEC Nurse 10) can be seen as a way to develop closer relationships with them.

Showing care toward the parents was described as especially important in relation to nighttime care, as “parents may feel heavy about leaving their children for night care” (ECEC Nurse A). The educators positioned themselves as providers of support for the parents. For example, one teacher said that “the parents who work in shifts really need

support” (ECEC Teacher B). The importance of listening to parents was stressed in the data. For example, one ECEC nurse explained how she listened to the work concerns of one parent during pick-up. She tried to talk about the child’s day, but “the parent had a strong need to unload his work-day on someone” (ECEC Nurse A). Aligned with this, daily conversations, even small talk, were described in the data as a bridge for “more professional discussions” (ECEC Teacher C) to build a trustful base for having more serious professional discussions with parents on difficult topics when needed.

In contrast to care, educators also shared criticism regarding parents’ choices and use of time. In the following extract, parents are blamed for their work and childcare choices:

There is a trend of working in the evenings and nights in our society. I wonder if parents want to change their work shifts.... It seems to me that parents want to work during the evening and night and take their children to ECEC, even though it feels bad. (ECEC Nurse H)

In many parts of her interview, this nurse criticized parents’ work and childcare choices, highlighting their lack of interest in taking care of the childcare duties themselves and positioning educators as advocates of the child’s best interest. Also, there was criticism of parents’ attempts to collaborate with educators, which may construct distance between the partners. In daily pick-up situations, parents were described as “changing [the] subject in the middle of the sentence” (ECEC Nurse D) when an educator was talking about the child’s day. This example attributes criticism to parents’ lack of interest in forming deeper collaborations with educators.

Further, there was criticism of young and single-parents: “I feel that there is a lot of young-parent families nowadays,... when the parents are about 20 years old.... I feel sometimes that they should be advised and given instructions, [such as] that your child needs thicker gloves” (ECEC Nurse A). Also, parents’ divorces were criticized in the data from the viewpoint of it being difficult to communicate with separated families, while the child is “one week here and another week there” (ECEC Teacher D).

On the one hand, educators understood that some parents working nonstandard hours were also trying to find time for themselves, thereby showing a more caring attitude toward the parents. On the other hand, they criticized the time management of the parents and their role as parents. The following two extracts show the tensional discourse of one teacher concerning parents’ arrangements to find time for themselves:

When the parents are working during nonstandard hours and the child is in the nonstandard daycare center, how can the time be found for the parents’ own time, time for their hobbies, and time to be with friends?... Does it mean longer days for the child at the ECEC center?... What is the role of the parents as educators of the child?” (ECEC Teacher B).

The extract above reflects, on one hand, an understanding of parental needs, promoting closeness in the parent–educator relationship; however, on the other hand, it criticizes the parents, which is echoed in the following extract:

The parents have lost their parenthood.... The parents who need their own time can be regarded as selfish,... and this is something that is visible among the parents using 24/7 daycare. (ECEC Teacher B)

The criticizing discourse above can be interpreted as reflecting criticism and the use of institutional power and control discourse, promoting distance in the educational relationship.

Discussion

In this paper, we studied how educators in extended hours ECEC construct closeness versus distance in educational collaboration by examining the language they used in interviews about their work. From their dialogs, we identified three tensional discourses: (a) the timing of ECEC and asynchrony; (b) a sense of time versus hurry; and (c) care versus criticism. These tensional discourses may simultaneously promote and hinder closeness in educational collaboration with children’s families. An important highlight of these findings is that these tensional ways of talking were evident within an individual educator’s discourse (e.g., ECEC Teacher B in the extracts on pages 18 and 19), meaning that this educator’s discourse consisted of divergent and competing views about their work with parents (Potter, 2012). This idea of tension is echoed elsewhere (Lang et al., 2016, 2020). However, it is also typical that the tensions were more implicit in the discourse and that the contradictions are found in the analysis process (see also Peltoperä et al., 2023). This has important theoretical and practical implications, as it may not be enough to identify and enhance supportive approaches and discourses, but it is necessary to call out and intervene in discourse that can hinder closeness in parent–educator collaboration. Our data also appeared to demonstrate the tensional terminology about these partnerships identified in other national and international research (Alasuutari, 2010; Einarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2019) and the

guiding policy documents of Finnish ECEC (FNAE, 2022). These tensions are visible in how educators discuss collaborations with parents, demonstrating a reflection of the broader socially and historically available ways of understanding these partnerships (Burr, 2003; Taylor, 2001).

The findings indicate that extended hours ECEC is a special context for educational partnerships, with the potential to provide both possibilities and challenges for building close and trustful relationships with parents. The timing of care, especially evenings and weekends, was constructed as a vulnerable time when more emotions are expressed (see also Peltoperä & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2023; Salonen et al., 2020). This may offer more affordances for building close educational partnerships, with ECEC educators noting that there were opportunities for unhurried time and that parents often opened up about their family lives. This may have to do with the social norms that, generally, weekdays include more active time and weekends include more leisure time (Daly, 2004; Siippainen et al., 2023). It is also possible that the rhythms in ECEC are more relaxed in the evenings and at weekends (see also Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Peltoperä et al., 2018; Rönkä et al., 2019; Statham & Mooney, 2003) or that families feel more comfortable talking with ECEC nurses or when there is a lower child-to-educator ratio, as has been found with older children (Rodriguez & Elbaum, 2013). The more relaxed rhythms, the educators working nonstandard hours, and/or the different ratios may also explain why the parents appeared more relaxed, since educational partnerships occur in relational interactions. In contrast, educators indicated at the same time that ECEC could feel rushed, especially if pick-ups or drop-offs occurred at standard times (between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m.), with implications for all families using ECEC. This aligns with other research showing that daily transitions into and out of ECEC can be challenging for parents and educators (Traum & Morgan, 2016). Thus, the asynchrony between parents' and educators', and especially teachers', schedules seems to promote distance in educational partnerships.

The discourses of the educators, which included criticism of the parents' work and educational practices, imply an unequal educator–parent relationship, promoting distance between the partners (Alasuutari, 2010). Educators' criticism of parents working nonstandard hours may reflect the societal and cultural norms of where and by whom young children should be cared for, especially during nonstandard hours (Peltoperä et al., 2022; Statham & Mooney, 2003). Some of the criticism focused on parents' age and relationship status; thus, some of our findings may also be transferrable to standard hours ECEC and outside the Finnish context and echoes other findings indicating that some educators may struggle to be supportive of divorced families (Øverland et al., 2013). However, as single parents are

overrepresented in extended hours ECEC (Moilanen et al., 2019; Rönkä et al., 2019), it is possible that they become generalized as one group, although single parents, just like all families, have individual strengths, needs, and resources for combining work and childcare.

The educators' discourses may reflect broad generalizations about the kinds of families using extended hours ECEC, which may make it difficult for educators to see and understand the unique experiences, needs, and goals of the parents, thereby hindering close parent–educator relationships (see also Hampshire et al., 2015). This type of discourse shows criticism regarding parents' work and childcare arrangements, with the belief that parents should make, or be able to make, different choices. Previous research (Peltoperä & Moilanen, 2024) has shown that choosing childcare in the context of nonstandard working hours is a complex process, involving both rational and emotional aspects. Although the interviewees said they had a good understanding of the special needs of parents working nonstandard hours, the needs of the children were stressed in their discourses as their primary interest. In the data, the educators' role as advocates of children's needs and well-being set the educators and the parents in contradictory positions, which can hinder the ability to build equal and close parent–educator relationships.

Practical and Policy Implications

Educators may benefit from support and training to better understand how parental well-being influences the quality of parents' care and how they, as educators, can be supportive of parental well-being. Instead of criticism and control, educators could be offered opportunities to engage in more reflective practice (Venninen et al., 2012) and bring a wondering attitude and openness to their exchanges with families. Some educators in this study shared structural practices that might promote more opportunities to connect (e.g., offering coffee on weekend mornings and organizing family sessions). Based on our results, we suggest that more attention be paid to encounters with parents during arrivals or drop-offs (see also Salonen et al., 2016), and especially when picking up children or these reunion times, as important encounters for building trust and closeness.

It is noteworthy that the teachers' and nurses' discourses differed from each other. It is possible that due to the different working hours (teachers mainly working standard hours and nurses working both standard and nonstandard hours), teachers described relationships as generally more distant than nurses, as they would have less frequent contact with families using extended ECEC. As teachers mainly work standard hours, they may miss sensitive and more unhurried encounters with parents during the evenings and weekends.

It is apparent from the data that meeting parents regularly creates the context necessary for building equal and close relationships. As teachers typically work standard hours, they meet parents only during those times, often described as rush hours in the data. Offering or structuring opportunities for teachers to work during extended hours could provide occasions for more relaxed encounters and, therefore, more closeness in the partnerships. It is also possible that it is not just the timing but the actual interactions of the nurses with families versus the teachers with families that are crucial for close relationships. It is also possible that parents feel more comfortable talking to nurses than to teachers due to the idea of more equal power relations. Additional observational research is necessary to better understand how educators with different roles and training interact and engage with families and how parents may differentially approach these educators.

In Finland, there is an ongoing discussion of the roles of different occupational groups in ECEC. In this study, we interviewed ECEC teachers and nurses; however, there is a third occupational group in ECEC, social pedagogues, who at the time of the data collection worked as ECEC teachers. Aligning with updates in federal policy (see, e.g., Nivala & Rönkkö, 2021), social pedagogues now focus more on working with families (e.g., discussing child rearing and connecting parents to the resources they need) than teaching. The study indicates that nonstandard hours can provide space for closer collaboration; thus, the working hours of social pedagogues should be planned accordingly.

Also, to help guide collaboration, each participants' role, power, and responsibility in the partnership should be explicitly acknowledged in national documents guiding ECEC. By being more explicit, this documentation could emphasize that parents are experts on their own children and, hence, that educators should actively seek parents' knowledge in this space; also, while educators have a wealth of child development knowledge, it should always be shared in ways that are attentive to each parents' individual needs and interests.

Limitations and Future Directions

Finnish extended hours ECEC is a unique service. We do not know the extent to which the results represent extended hours ECEC solely, as we have not interviewed educators from other ECEC settings (regular ECEC or family childcare) or from other countries. In addition, although the use of language is related to societally and culturally available discursive practices, it can also be seen as strongly contextual (Burr, 2003). Some of our results focused on the time and timing of ECEC, while others represented the relationships between parents and educators without specifying

the form of ECEC. We assume that these results also have significance in improving educational partnerships in other ECEC settings.

Lang et al. (2016, 2020) emphasized that it can be challenging to measure parent–educator partnerships collectively, as done in this paper, as it may miss the important variation across the different educational partnerships formed within a child group. In future research, the individual relationships between an educator and a parent and the parents' point of view should also be examined.

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first of its kind to focus on educators' talk and the discourses they (re)produce during semi-structured interviews about closeness in educational partnerships. Thus, in the future, these results could support an ethnographic approach that includes observations to study how individual educational partnerships are built in practice. Future research should study whether teachers' power positions with parents are more unequal and that of nurses are more equal, as nurses have more opportunities to get to know the families and build closer relationships with them, and families may approach them differently regardless of ECEC timing. This is especially important, considering that ECEC teachers are responsible for educational collaboration. This type of research is essential for the ECEC field to foster the best possible educational partnerships in the service of young children's development. ECEC educators should prioritize not only the caring of children but also the relationships they form with parents and families, as quality parent–educator partnerships help children thrive in a variety of contexts (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Forry et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2020, 2024).

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Declarations

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