‘It’s in my interest to collaborate …’ – parents’ views of the process of interacting and building relationships with preschool practitioners in Sweden

Tuula Vuorinen

To cite this article: Tuula Vuorinen (2020): ‘It’s in my interest to collaborate …’ – parents’ views of the process of interacting and building relationships with preschool practitioners in Sweden, Early Child Development and Care, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2020.1722116

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1722116

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 04 Feb 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 148

View related articles

View Crossmark data
‘It’s in my interest to collaborate … ’ – parents’ views of the process of interacting and building relationships with preschool practitioners in Sweden

Tuula Vuorinen

School of Education, Culture and Communication, Malardalen University, Vasteras, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article aims to explore parents’ perspectives on, and experiences of, home and preschool collaboration in a Swedish context. The research question is: How do parents perceive the process of building good relationships with preschool practitioners? The data consist of interviews with 10 parents with one or more children attending preschool. The research process follows the procedures significant to constructivist grounded theory. In the results, parents stress the necessity of continuity in building trusting and authentic relationships with preschool practitioners in order to shoulder parental responsibilities from afar and facilitate children’s well-being, development and learning at preschool. Parents attempt to create prerequisites for collaboration when choosing a preschool. The relationship-building process is described in different ways; some see it as effortless, while others see it as a struggle.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 November 2019
Accepted 23 January 2020

KEYWORDS
Parent; preschool; collaboration; relationship; constructivist grounded theory

Introduction

The importance of parental collaboration in Early Child Education and Care (ECEC) is emphasized in policy documents, although parents’ perspectives on collaboration are rarely included (Larsen et al., 2012, 2013; Tallberg Broman, 2015). Previous research on home and preschool collaboration partially revolves around what policymakers and preschool practitioners wish to achieve through strengthening parental collaboration in ECEC and partially around a critique of the inequities built into a taken-for-granted view of parental collaboration in which when issues concerning equality, for example, class, race or gender, are not taken into account. The former begins from a traditional position of schooling when focusing on improving children’s academic learning through, for example, educating parents and strengthening the home as a learning environment. The latter views parental collaboration as being socially organized and historically situated when focusing on the social construction of parenting and collaboration, pointing to parental involvement and inequality and drawing on alternative definitions and understandings of parental involvement in education (Erikson, 2004; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998).

Further, parents and teachers are part of a professional relationship that is different from other relationships. Jensen and Jensen (2008) describe the relationship between parents and teachers as an asymmetrical power relationship since practitioners collaborate in their professional position and parents in their private position, regardless of occupation. Practitioners have not only their professional competence to lean on but also an education system to support them. In studies (e.g.
Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Osgood, 2012), parents may be understood to be not only partners, but also as customers in a market. As partners, parents are expected to take more responsibility and be more active in their children’s education (Simonsson & Markström, 2013). However, as customers, they may have increased demands regarding preschool quality (Markström & Simonsson, 2017). Scopelliti and Musatti (2013) argue, however, that studies do not capture parents’ multifaceted views of preschool quality if they are regarded as mere clients of a service. For example, parents’ values and goals are not visualized in studies that scrutinize the difference between parents’ expectations and evaluations of ECEC services. Further, Lang, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Jeon (2017) argue that much of the research on parental collaboration has focused on the demographic correlations of parental involvement. Other factors, for example, how emotional bonds are formed between parents and practitioner, have been less studied.

As previously mentioned, there are few empirical studies that have included the voices of parents and the question ‘What do parents consider to be important when collaborating with ECEC practitioners?’ is therefore rarely addressed in research. Studies that include practitioners giving their view on parents and home and preschool collaboration are more common (Alasuutari, 2010; Hujala, Turja, Filomena Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009). However, the primary inclusion of preschool practitioners’ voices on home and preschool collaboration is problematic – not only because it visualizes only one view of a two-sided process – but also because ECEC researchers and practitioners may share an understanding when they are professionals in the same field. Haug (2003) argues that researchers studying preschool often have an inside perspective when they are familiar with preschool as former employees, for example. This may be presented as a strength, as in the study by Murray et al. (2018), when possessing ‘practical wisdom’ (p. 597), but it can also become a weakness. Haug (2003) argues that when researchers identify themselves with preschool practitioners, they may be less critical of the practitioners’ perceptions of a phenomenon. Thus, the views expressed by practitioners about parents or home and preschool collaboration may not be challenged or questioned in studies.

Further, Gillies (2008) and Osgood (2012) argue that parents and practitioners do not always share underlying values and norms about parenthood and child-rearing. They may have very different views on children’s needs and learning or how to act in the child’s best interest. Practitioners may also value parents differently by how visible they are and to what extent, they engage in preschool activities (Smidt, 2007). There are, therefore, valid reasons to include parents’ voices in research and scrutinize home and ECEC collaboration as a phenomenon. Swarts and Easterbrooks (2014) also point at the need for contemporary studies on home and ECEC collaboration since ECEC has experienced major changes and earlier studies, often more than 25 years old, are not always transferable over time. The aim of this article is to explore how parents perceive the process of interacting and building relationships with preschool practitioners in a Swedish context. The research question is: How do parents perceive the process of building good relationships with preschool practitioners?

**The Swedish context**

In Sweden, preschool is part of the education system but has its own curriculum. Preschool is generally for 3–5 year olds and it means that preschool is partially free of charge for parents. A system of maximum fees and vouchers enables parents to choose between preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017). Statistics (SCB, 2018) show that most of the preschools in Sweden are municipal (72%) and operate alongside independent preschools and preschools run as a family cooperation. The majority (84%) of all children between 1 and 5 years are enrolled in preschool. The number of children attending preschool has increased over the last 10 years by around 22%, from 416,941 (2007) to 509,784 (2017). The total number of employees working with children has increased by around 25%, from 80,396 (2007) to 100,156 (2017). However, the overall percentage of preschool teachers working with children has dropped from 48% (2007) to 40% (2017), whilst the percentage of
employees who lack training in education has increased from 5% (2007) to 30% (2017). The Swedish
Schools Inspectorate (2018) finds the low proportion of preschool teachers worrying, particularly
when considering that the teaching responsibilities of preschool teachers were clarified in the curri-
culum in 2010.

The Education Act (2010:800) and the Swedish national preschool curriculum (Swedish National
Agency for Education, 2016) specify that parents with custody are responsible for their child’s
upbringing and development. This means that they have not only the right but also the obligation
to decide on matters concerning their child (Ch. 6, §11; Parental Code, 1949:381). The collaboration,
relationship and communication between parents and preschool practitioners are addressed in the
preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016), as are their roles and respon-
sibilities. The document states that work with children should ‘take place in close and confidential
cooperation with the home’ (p. 13). The work team should ‘show respect for parents and be respon-
sible for developing good relationships between staff of the preschool and the children’s families’
(p. 13) and gain ‘the confidence of parents’ (p. 5). The work team is to ‘discuss’ norms and rules
with the parents (p. 9) and maintain ‘an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child’s well-
being, development and learning, both inside and outside the preschool’ (p. 13). Further, preschool
should ‘supplement the home’ (p. 13) and the staff should ‘help families by supporting them in their
role of bringing up their children and helping them grow and develop’ (p. 4). The work team should
also ‘take due account of parents’ viewpoints when planning and carrying out activities’. Preschool
teachers are specifically responsible for the child and parent receiving a ‘good introduction’ and
for the development dialogue. Preschool teachers are also responsible for the realization of parental
influence when ‘ensuring that parents receive opportunities to participate and exercise influence
over how goals can be made concrete in pedagogical planning’ and for ‘involving guardians in assess-
ing the work of the preschool’.

In the revised curriculum, applied from 1 July 2019 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018),
the wording relating to the communication and the descriptive parts of the relationship between
practitioners and parents remains, though it added that the work team should ‘keep informed
about children’s personal circumstances with respect for children’s integrity’ (p. 18). Wording such
as the work team should ‘show respect for the parents’ has been cut as well as the parts stating
that preschool should ‘supplement the home’ and ‘help families by supporting them’. The term
‘upbringing’ is no longer used. Parental influence and participation have shifted, from planning
and implementation to preschool evaluation and improvement. The responsibility for parents receiv-
ing a good introduction has shifted from preschool teachers to the principal.

**Previous research**

The relationship between practitioners and parents has been described in various ways in studies, as
have the prerequisites for a good relationship. Practitioners may feel, as in Cottle and Alexander’s
(2014) study, that positive relationships are founded on mutual trust, shared values and a
common purpose. However, Santarelli, Koegel, Casas, and Koegel (2001) stress that parents and pro-
fessionals rarely share the same backgrounds and it is, therefore, important to stay flexible and open-
minded in order to learn and become aware of the differences. Working relationships are not built on
conformity but on practitioners and parents agreeing to respect each other’s differences (Rous,
Hallam, Grove, Robinsson, & Machara, 2003). However, the act of respecting each other’s differences
becomes a bit of a challenge when differences are constructed and valued in diverse ways. Osgood,
Albon, Allen, and Hollingworth (2013) stress that parent constructions relate to their social position
and how they align with normative parenting practices in educational settings. This means that
some families may be categorized as ‘civilized’ (Bach, 2014) or ‘deficient’ and ‘hard-to-reach’ due
to their social position and ability to behave in accordance with the dominant norms (Osgood
et al., 2013). If one part is constructed in a pathologized way, it may cause the other part to distance
itself from the relationship (Osgood, 2012).
Building relationships requires continual renewal, maintenance and revisiting when balancing issues relating to power, knowledge and expertise (Hedges & Gibbs, 2013). Time and continuity are described as prerequisites in order for relationships to grow positively (Pirchio, Passiatore, Trintrini, & Taeschner, 2013). When engaging in brief conversations, parents and practitioners who meet on a daily basis are given the opportunity to build trusting and mutual relationships. However, the process of building relationships may have different outcomes for parents and practitioners depending on their previous experience and knowledge. Swarts and Easterbrooks (2014) stress that parents’ and practitioners’ views of one another may change over time, and not always mutually for the better. They found that parents tend to become more positive and less anxious as their relationship with practitioners develops, whilst practitioners tend to develop a less favourable view of parents as they learn more about them. The reason for the latter may be that practitioners who are more knowledgeable come to view themselves as experts and may, therefore, focus on parents’ weaknesses rather than their strengths. Practitioners and parents may also have different views on parenting and conflicts associated with these differences may become more apparent over time. However, Mahmood (2013) argues for the opposite in situations where experience may lead practitioners away from an ideal view of parenting and recognize other ways of supporting child development.

Successful parent–practitioner relationships do, however, tend to require both parties to make an effort to contribute to an egalitarian relationship even though the barriers are sometimes hard to overcome. On the one hand, socioeconomic aspects and parents’ own educational backgrounds may contribute to parents feeling uncomfortable about interacting with practitioners (Crozier, 2000). Differences in underlying assumptions, biases and values can also become an obstacle in home and preschool collaboration. A mutual trust may create an upward spiral when attempting to increase the commitment to the relationship, and the opposite, a lack of trust, may lessen the feeling of commitment (Mahmood, 2013).

**Methodology**

This study is based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) in which the overall intention is to create concepts or substantive theory grounded in data. Constructivist grounded theory rests on the ontological assumption that social reality is contextual, processual and constructed on both a structural and individual level. Epistemologically, the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and the participant is emphasized when the participant and the researcher bring a specific contextual understanding to a meaning-making process. Data are therefore seen as a co-construct between the participant and the researcher.

**Participants**

The results are based on qualitative interviews with 10 parents (nine mothers and one father) with one or more children attending preschool. The parents were from 29 to 48 years of age. Some of the parents were new to parenting whilst others had about 20 years’ experience of being a parent. One of the participants could be considered a ‘professional parent’ as she provided foster care for children. She also provided an ‘emergency home’ for infants whose parents, for various reasons, were unable to care for their newborn. The participants’ educational level ranged from primary school to university. Four participants were first- or second-generation immigrants and two of them had lived in Sweden for 5 years or less. Eight participants were married or lived in a long-term relationship, and two were single mothers. Nine participants had chosen a municipal preschool for their child, and one had chosen a preschool organized as a family cooperative. A majority of the parents had experience of more than one preschool as they had several children of different ages or had changed preschools for an only child. At least three of the participants had experience of both municipal and independent preschools. The participants live in different communities and these
communities ranged from Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, to small towns and rural areas within a 150 km radius of Stockholm.

**Research procedures**

Data were gathered and analysed in accordance with the procedures significant for constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Research was characterized by an iterative process in which data were gathered and analysed simultaneously. The initial approach used inductive and open-ended questions in order to stimulate participants to share their experience and views on parental collaboration at preschool. Data were gathered through theoretical sampling when striving for saturation through variation and contradictory cases. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analysed before the sampling and interviewing process continued. The transcripts were initially analysed using word-by-word and line-by-line open coding when comparing incidents, scrutinizing the words used in the interviews and identifying processes. Questions and thoughts generated by the coding process were written as memos when attempting to elaborate categories, study their relationships and find gaps. Later in the process, coding became focused when significant codes from the previous coding were used in the analysis process. The process was characterized by constant comparison and the aim was to develop abstract categories grounded in the data.

**Ethics**

This study has been conducted with the ethical principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2017) in mind. All participants were informed about the terms and procedures before entering the study and they were also informed that they could interrupt their participation at any time. All of them gave their consent prior to their participation. Further, confidentiality has been maintained throughout the study.

**Results**

Building trusting relationships may serve several purposes for parents. However, the main purpose for the parents in this study is to gain information about their children at preschool and be given the opportunity to communicate and collaborate about the needs of their child. Parents seek to practice a form of ‘remote parenting’ when practitioners become the eyes and the hands of the parent. The concept of remote parenting is understood in previous studies to mean parents guiding and controlling their children from afar (Locke, Hoa, & Tam, 2012). In this study, the concept of remote parenting has been widened to include practitioners, since parents lack the ability to address or reach their children directly (Vuorinen, 2018).

The results show that parents are dependent on building trusting relationships with practitioners in order to shoulder parental responsibilities. Parents address the need for practitioners to both individualize and individualize practice. Individualizing practice requires no specific action from the practitioners other than noticing what kind of activities the child is engaging in, and recounting the child’s thoughts and feelings to the parent. To summarize, individualizing refers to practitioners visualizing the individual child’s stay at preschool for parents. However, individualizing practice requires specific actions when adapting routines and activities to meet the child’s individual needs. Consequently, parents seek for practitioners to inform them about their child’s activities during the day (being the parents eyes) and adapt routines or activities to meet their child’s individual needs (being the parents hands). A weak or non-existent relationship with practitioners makes it difficult for parents to stay informed and to ensure that their children’s needs at preschool are met.
Parents create prerequisites for building trusting relationships

Continuity is highly valued by parents and is regarded as a prerequisite for building trusting relationships with practitioners. The parents in this study attempted to opt out of preschools with a high staff turnover and a high proportion of temporary staff from the very outset, when choosing a preschool for their child. Parents regard preschools that are unable to maintain a stable group of staff as being of low quality when they are not able to meet the parents’ safety needs. Parents strive to establish a personal relationship with practitioners and learn to know them not only as professionals, but as individuals, while being reluctant to trust their children to strangers. The parents in this study pay attention to the ‘preschool atmosphere’ when seeking to collaborate with practitioners who are perceived as confident, warm and welcoming. One of the parents describes an atmosphere that made her opt out of other preschools, even when moving away from the neighbourhood in which the preschool was located:

I feel this sense of warmth and safety … I see that … they see my child all the time … they are always able to recount the things that my child has done … / … / … it also feels like a work team … this is a relatively small preschool … so the whole work team at the preschool … they are very closely knit and have worked together for a long time … eh … long … it depends on … several years anyway … and they have … have together, it feels like, created like ‘this is us’.

In the quote, the ability to individualize practice is specified as part of the warm atmosphere, as practitioners ‘see’ the individual child all the time and are able to recount its activities. Other parents talk in terms of the practitioner ‘owning’ the preschool and, along with the ownership, came a sense of responsibility and familiarity, given that nobody can enter preschool without being noticed and acknowledged. Another parent shared her view of an opposite situation in which her sense of the negative atmosphere eventually caused her to change preschools:

There was something in the air like … these teachers don’t get on … they don’t like each other … there was something in the air … people quit [their jobs] … there was a lot of sick leave and … I don’t like it when kids arrive and it’s like … sometimes there were two young people who hadn’t been there before … it didn’t feel ok to leave [my child] with strangers.

One of the parents, who had just moved from one department to another, describes how her trust in the staff diminished due to the transition:

I don’t have the same sense of trust for the staff [in the new department] … they haven’t gained it … they are … I think they’re superficial … that’s why I disagree … or what should I say … I don’t feel like I’m ‘at home’ there …

The quote above captures how parents’ trust may change over time, how the building of trust relies on a deeper relationship and that the relationship can develop to become as comfortable and relaxed as feeling ‘like home’. The parents in this study show that the deeper and more trusting the relationship becomes, the more authentic they become in the relationship. Authenticity is described by parents in terms of letting someone get to know you, letting go of a façade and becoming more direct and honest.

It feels like we are so close and then you let … you … I let … them know me as the person I am. / … / as a parent you lose your patience sometimes … and maybe I have tried to keep up a … thus maintaining some kind of facade.

However, the most experienced parent showed that authenticity is not always linked to a deeper relationship with practitioners but to parents’ own experience of parenthood when becoming more confident over time and through ‘daring’ to be honest. The most experienced parent in this study stated:

I have experience of children … of how children are and of being a parent … and I really do the best I can … it doesn’t get to be perfect but I have nothing to be ashamed of … you dare to be honest … there is no need for misunderstandings.
It becomes apparent that her confidence as a parent has increased over time when comparing her straightforward approach with her early experience of preschool collaboration when maintaining a façade and reacting differently to comments made by practitioners:

Stressed as you were [as a younger parent] you dropped off the kids and you didn’t share anything [with the practitioners] … no … and you hoped that the kid’s would also keep their mouths shut (laughs). If we had had a fight [in the morning] … yeah, you know … and if they brought something up you took it as ‘Oh God, what did she mean … Was she criticizing me?’ … that sort of thing … I probably reacted very differently [back then].

Parents in this study seek and welcome an authentic relationship with practitioners and practitioners being a place bound team appear to facilitate this process.

The need to be acknowledged

The parents in this study experienced the process of establishing relationships with practitioners in various ways. Some parents view it as an almost effortless process, whilst others describes it as an ongoing struggle. The practitioners’ approach to parents may be described as ‘warm and welcoming’ when they take the time to greet the parent and engage in a brief conversation during drop-offs and pick-ups. One parent stated that ‘they always have time for parents at drop-offs and pick-ups’ and practitioners encourage parents to engage in conversation and speak their minds. Other parents may feel the opposite, i.e. that practitioners do not always have the time or the interest to engage in conversation with parents. One of the parents stated that they have come to the conclusion that practitioners may be ‘hiding’ from their responsibility to interact with parents:

I think, as a staff member, you hide in the child group/ … / It’s a bit like they don’t have time to meet with parents because they have to be with the children. So as a parent … when you drop off your child in the morning you go in and leave them with the group of children … where the staff are. No staff member comes out to meet you in the hall. They never really give you the opportunity to have a one-on-one dialogue … there are always children around … and you certainly cannot leave them. Even when you ask, ‘Could we have a moment? Maybe even tomorrow because I understand that you can’t leave [the children] right now’ … and they say ‘No, the schedule doesn’t really allow it’. So I feel that … they don’t want to. It’s like ‘Of course our work is about being with the children’ … ‘Yes, absolutely’ … It’s a problem that is difficult to argue against or say anything about … Of course I want them to be with the children… so … ‘You must understand… What it would be like if we were to spend 10 minutes with all parents … it wouldn’t work: That’s the kind of argument you face and … then it’s difficult.

In some situations, parents may also feel that practitioners refuse to acknowledge their presence, for example, by not responding to a parent’s ‘hello’, avoiding the parent, refusing to make eye contact or not meeting with the parent. The refusal to acknowledge the child’s and the parent’s presence creates a sense of insecurity or anger among parents when they don’t feel welcome. One of the parents elaborates on the sense of insecurity when not being acknowledged by one of the practitioners:

Sometimes if you meet her [practitioner] outside preschool, she barely even wants to say hello … and sometimes … some mornings she hardly says hello, either … and sometimes you almost get the feeling … you almost get the feeling that ‘Well, she thinks we’re bad parents, is it so that we …’ … you start scrutinizing yourself … ‘did we bring the wrong clothing for our guy?’ or ‘she thinks we’re leaving him for too long …’. With [the first child] in particular and especially the first year … back then I was a bit more insecure. / … / It feels strange to complain about someone not being sociable enough … because it makes you insecure. We [as parents] decided to cope with the situation … and eventually … sometimes when she didn’t say hello … then you could get a bit annoyed … and sometimes you spontaneously became a little childish … like … ‘Well, I won’t say hello, either!’ … so you had to make an effort not to fall into that [behaviour].

Parents who lack experience of preschool, in this case, first-time parents, young parents and immigrant parents, tend to be more vulnerable in these situations when they are not acknowledged, reacting with self-doubt and withdrawal. Another parent stated:

I feel invisible … I feel … I noticed … we are not welcome … I don’t know why that is … so I said ‘No’ to my kid … ‘I can’t go there, it’s a good thing that we’re staying home’.
A more experienced parent, with older children or several children, reacted with anger and became confrontational in similar situations, demanding an acknowledgement. A mother of three children describes a situation:

In the morning ... I'm not so impressed by them [the staff] because ... personally I think that when you arrive, as a staff member you should come and say 'hello' or 'good morning' ... but it doesn't happen that often. / ... / In such situations I have whistled / ... / like a dog whistle. I'm probably not a very popular person. / ... / I try to give them a chance to be nice but when I see that it's not working ... I tell them what I think ... and if there is no improvement I actually call the head teacher ... when the staff disappear and don't come and say hello to your child. It doesn't feel good either as a parent or as a child when no one says hello ... when you don't feel welcome.

The parents above tend to respond in three different ways when practitioners distance themselves from the relationship by not acknowledging parents and children when they arrive. The first parent maintains the status quo by controlling his own behaviour, neither improving nor worsening the situation. The second parent widened the gap between herself and the practitioner by withdrawing from a stressful situation. The third parent tried to close the gap between herself and the practitioner by clearly addressing the situation through confronting the practitioners and seeking support from the head teacher.

An asymmetrical relationship

The relationship between parents and practitioners is described as asymmetrical by parents due to their different roles and due to practitioners being in possession of information that is valuable to parents. Parents point at the asymmetrical power relationship in which practitioners collaborate in their professional role and parents in their private role. Parents stress the importance of feeling safe when entrusting their children to the care of others and sharing private information about themselves and their family with the practitioners. The feeling of safety is built on two, possibly contradictory, aspects since parents stress the importance of practitioners acting in accordance with their professional role yet they wish to get an idea of the person behind the role whilst the person still is in their role. This tends to be a balancing act in which parents strive to establish a relationship with practitioners that is personal, yet not too private or too distant. Parents expect practitioners to share some personal information about themselves when 'it feels natural in a conversation'. Practitioners who reveal nothing about their lives outside preschool prevent the building of trusting relationships when they are secretive and those who reveal too much about their personal lives may create concerns when stepping out of their professional role.

Further, parents have come to identify some relationships with practitioners as being stronger and others as weaker, depending on the 'chemistry' or practitioners' way of communicating with and approaching parents.

The relationships with those who work there becomes different ... you may talk more with certain members of staff ... you have a different kind of confidence or the relationship looks different ... so it becomes very personal, I think ...

Other parents may 'raise a red flag' and avoid members of the staff on the basis of their previous experience of interacting with these specific staff members. This becomes specifically apparent in situations in which parents perceive that they are being reduced in their role and not seen as equal partners in the relationship. The sense of inequality is expressed in terms of practitioners not meeting parents halfway, or giving parents unwanted advice about parenting. Parents may also come to the conclusion that specific practitioners are not trustworthy when breaking previous agreements or making decisions on behalf of the parents.

The asymmetrical relationship is also manifested in parents who are dependent on the practitioners as caretakers and providers of information. Their dependency becomes apparent in situations in which they feel the need to weigh their words and consider the line of action before raising concerns that may be interpreted by the practitioners as a critique. A parent expressed the
feeling of ‘being in their [the practitioner’s] claws’ when they are not able to address her concerns regarding her child’s development and learning without weighing up how this may negatively impact her relationship with the practitioners or their attitudes towards her son. She hopes that they are ‘professional enough’ to handle her concerns without ‘punishing’ her son but when not being sure she hesitates and weighs the need against the potential outcomes. She states that she is used to having difficult or challenging conversations in her profession and that she is confident that she has the knowledge and ability to raise difficult questions in a good way. Still, she hesitates and expresses the need ‘to charge up’ for an up-coming conversation. Other parents may choose to ‘let go’ when they are afraid of worsening a difficult situation or do not feel comfortable about speaking their mind. However, the most experienced parents state that they communicate what’s on their minds more directly when advocating for their children’s needs.

Parents describe a lack of insight as worrying when they are striving to ensure that their child is safe and cared for at preschool. A lack of individualization may cause parents to become questionable and demanding when they are unable to shoulder their parental responsibilities. One of the parents visualizes how she became a ‘demanding parent’ at a specific preschool due to the lack of information and insight. The lack of information made her feel insecure about how her child was being cared for at preschool, causing her to act in a certain way:

You try to hurry and pick-up … as early as possible and [drop the child off] as late as possible … so that she [her child] doesn’t need to be there for too long. And then I put pressure on the staff and ask a lot … and unfortunately I think that as a parent … when you feel that you’re not really getting any response, you become a bit ‘on’ [as in activated] … almost a bit demanding and asking questions about everything.

Another parent describes the opposite, when being ‘deactivated’ by practitioners who take the initiative to engage in conversation and willingly share information. The process of being ‘a nagger’ ceased when the information she requested began to flow more easily. The parent describes the process as ‘in the end [before the transition], they willingly approached me and said “Oh [parents first name], today we had …” [recounts a learning situation in an enthusiastic preschool teacher voice]’. In this particular case, the parent was concerned about the staff’s ability to undertake their learning assignment and provide a learning environment for her child, because of her child’s late development in certain areas. When a preschool teacher shared her thoughts about children’s learning, the parents came to realize that ‘they really have an underlying idea about everything they do’. This made her feel ‘really safe and – that felt great’. The examples above show how the practitioners’ ability to inform parents about their work and their child’s activities during the day is key to gaining a parent’s trust. Another parent concludes:

When I see that my children are content and happy … and I hear about their day and the staff are very clear about what they’ve been doing during the day and why … then I feel safe / … / they know how I think and I know how they think … and it is about me feeling safe as a parent.

Transparency is highly valued by parents since it gives them an opportunity to understand not only preschool activities but also about the thought behind them.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore parents’ perspectives on, and experience of, home and preschool collaboration in a Swedish context. The research question, ‘How do parents perceive the process of building good relationships with preschool practitioners?’ was addressed. The results indicate that Swedish preschools may face a number of challenges regarding parental collaboration since the process of building good relationships between practitioners and the children’s families may not only be hindered by the attitudes or the willingness of staff and parents, but also by structural and organizational factors. Facilitating factors, highlighted in previous research and by the parents in this study, can be difficult to maintain and develop in a preschool that grows and becomes more efficient, while also reducing the proportion of trained staff. The preschool staff’s collaboration assignment is
clearly stated in the preschool curriculum (2018) and practitioners are expected to take responsibility for developing trusting relationships with parents. However, the time available for conversations and ongoing meetings tends to decrease. Time and continuity have been highlighted in research (Hedges & Gibbs, 2013; Pirchio et al., 2013), and by parents in this study, as being a prerequisite for creating good relationships between parents and staff as regular meetings can contribute to balancing a skewed power relationship.

The power ascribed to parents in research relates primarily to parents as actors in a market, as, at least in theory, they have the opportunity to choose and opt out of preschool for their child, while also being able to make demands regarding the quality of the preschool (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Osgood, 2012). Parents’ vulnerability as actors is also made clear in research when an education system designed with neoliberal leanings requires that parents can, and want to, orient themselves within the education system and make conscious choices. In this study, a high proportion of the parents have made a conscious choice based on an assessment of how well the staff can meet their child’s need for supervision and care and the opportunity to interact with the staff regarding their child’s needs. However, the preschool’s work relating to care is barely recognized in the preschool’s internal work, for example, through documentation (Löfdahl, 2014). Thus, it can be difficult for parents to estimate how well their child’s needs are being met at preschool. Because of a lack of documentation, parents may base their choice on an abstract feeling as they assess the staff’s interaction potential and their ability to provide care based on the preschool’s atmosphere. The parents’ choice of preschool therefore involves a responsibility for collaboration as they try to create the conditions in which their relationship with the staff can develop and deepen.

The parents in this study also make the staff’s position of power visible in the preschool. The parents are dependent on the staff becoming the parent’s eyes and hands at preschool, since the former has ongoing responsibility for the child’s well-being, even at preschool. This means that even if the responsibility is transferred to the preschool when the parent departs, parents still have both an emotional interest and a legal obligation to ensure that their child’s supervision and care needs are met during their absence. The parent’s relationship with the staff then becomes key because it is through the staff that parents can create a picture of their child’s stay at the preschool and it is through the staff that the parent can influence their child’s situation at the preschool. Their relationship with the staff becomes central to parents, as it enables them to gain insight and exercise influence over their own child’s stay.

Parents visualize their own vulnerability in the process of building relationships, since, even though it forms part of the staff’s task of taking responsibility for developing good relationships with the parents (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018), they see themselves as being dependent on the staff’s willingness to collaborate. The parents give examples of how their relationship with the staff can be weakened when a personal meeting fails or when the response is lacking. Osgood (2012) notes that in a neoliberal education system, the possibility of building authentic relationships has decreased and the tone between staff and parents in preschool has hardened. In this study, parents’ voices only tend to harden, or cease, in situations in which they perceive that the staff distance themselves from the relationship and do not acknowledge the parents as equal partners. One of the parents in this study visualizes the gap between her and the practitioners when both parts distance themselves from the relationship. Osgood (2012) argue that a gap may be created if one part is constructed in at pathologized way. In this study, one of the parents sense that the practitioners do not appreciate her presence at preschool and she therefore withdraws from the relationship. In this particular case, the parent becomes hard to reach when trying to avoid the stressful situation of not being acknowledged by the practitioners. In similar situations, when not being acknowledges by practitioners, other parents become confrontational demanding an acknowledgement. The different ways of dealing with the situation can be understood from the parents’ social position and their resources. Parents who do not master the Swedish language and parents who have not yet developed an
understanding of the Swedish education system are at risk of breaking unspoken norms. They may also find it difficult to bring forth their perspective and argue for their parental rights. The importance of acknowledging parents cannot be emphasized enough, especially parents who lack experience of preschool.

Finally, the results of this study point to the need to include parents in studies that concern home and preschool collaboration, as collaboration is a process that is mutual to two parties. The parents' perspective may facilitate home and preschool collaboration as it contributes to creating an understanding of how parents perceive the process of collaborating, interacting and building relationships with practitioners.

**Limitations and directions for future studies**

The aim of this article was to explore parents' perspectives on, and experiences of, home and preschool collaboration in a Swedish context. The current study consisted of a small, but various, group of parents giving rich and personal descriptions of their experiences of collaborating and building relationships with practitioners in preschool settings. Nevertheless, the sample includes only one father since and this can be perceived as a limitation. However, in this study, the sample was selected considering variation and saturation rather than representation. In the future, it would be beneficial to study parental collaboration through a gender perspective, or even a fathers' perspective, but it was not an aim in this study. Furthermore, other ways of gathering data on home and preschool collaboration may be considered, such as observations or inquiries.

**Practice and policy**

The implications for practices in early care and educational settings and stakeholders are discussed.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by Malardalen University, Vasteras, Sweden.

**Notes on contributor**

*Tuula Vuorinen* is a final year PhD student and lecturer at the School of Education, Culture and Communication, Malardalen University, Sweden. Her research interest is home and preschool collaboration.

**ORCID**

Tuula Vuorinen [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1349-5626](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1349-5626)

**References**


Löfdahl, A., & Pérez Prieto, H. (2009). Institutional narratives within the performative preschool in Sweden: ‘if we write that we’re no good, that’s not good publicity’! Early Years, 29(3), 261–270.


