



Enhancing the quality of early childhood education and care: ECEC tutors' perspectives of family engagement in Spain

Jesús Paz-Albo Prieto 

Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación, Lenguaje, Cultura y Artes, Ciencias Histórico-Jurídicas y Humanísticas y Lenguas Modernas, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain

ABSTRACT

Access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is important for developmental outcomes and school success. The first years of life are a critical period for learning and the quality of early experiences can have a significant impact later in life. Parenting is one of the primary influences on children's development and family engagement is crucial in children's educational success. This study presents a descriptive analysis of ECEC tutors' perspectives ($N = 120$) about family engagement across schools in Spain. Data were obtained from the Spanish National Education Council (the *Consejo Escolar del Estado*) to assess parental school involvement in a total of 63 ECEC centres. Findings suggest that early childhood tutors have a positive perspective of parental involvement and play a key role in supporting active school involvement of parents that enhance the quality of ECEC programmes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 July 2017

Accepted 11 December 2017

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; family engagement; parent school involvement; tutors' perspectives; educational quality; Spain

The rapid changes of today's world present new and greater demands on our education system. There has been a growing awareness of the necessity to raise standards and improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017; Kwon, 2002; National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, 2007). Although ECEC programmes vary on many dimensions that may be related to programme quality, a number of distinct research literatures provide relevant insights into the beneficial effects of preschool quality programmes on children's learning and development (Bakken et al., 2017; Barnett, 1995; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2015; National Research Council, 2001). Yet the significant growth of interest in quality in ECEC programmes in the United States and many other countries, such as Spain has led to increased attention to parental school involvement to enhance children's achievement and lift education outcomes (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Edwards, Sheridan, & Knoche, 2008; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). The period of preschool is important because it includes important milestones in children's development (Bartolotta & Shulman, 2010) and the question of parental involvement is integrally tied to the preschool period, as parenting is one of the primary influences on children's development (Landry, 2014; Newland, Coyl-Shepherd, & Paquette, 2013). In fact, families are instrumental in facilitating early experiences that have lasting impact on children's ability to learn and succeed in school and in life.

In the research literature, parental involvement is often used interchangeably with names that include parental engagement, family involvement, family-school partnership or, as it's more commonly called in ECEC, family engagement. We will use these terms to refer to the formal and informal relationships that families have with early childhood services. Existing research suggests that parental

involvement is critical for children's growth and can be strengthened with positive results (Hiatt-Michael, 2005; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2008). There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of early parental involvement for improving children's outcomes (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004), and research demonstrates that positive outcomes result from establishing positive partnerships between parents and educators to support student learning and development (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Loughran, 2008; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). Moreover, the first five years of life are critical for children's development and the quality of these early experiences can have a significant impact later in life setting the stage for later school success (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012; Paz-Albo Prieto, Cvencek, Herranz, Hervás, & Meltzoff, 2017).

While there is mounting evidence supporting the benefits of parental involvement during the early years, there is an increasing demand for additional ECEC research to inform policy and practice (Westmoreland, Bouffard, O'Carroll, & Rosenburg, 2009). Further, parental involvement is crucial in children's educational success since it is a critical component of high-quality ECEC (Snow, 2012). Several studies suggest that parental involvement can enhance quality in ECEC (OECD, 2013a, 2013b; Snow, 2012) and it is central to the achievement of quality outcomes for children (McWayne et al., 2004; Melhuish et al., 2015). In fact, some countries such as Spain have been emphasizing parental engagement as a key quality issue in ECEC provisions and they have been focused on enhancing collaborations between parents and ECEC settings to encourage quality in early childhood.

Quality matters in ECEC

The issue of quality in ECEC has been a recurring topic on European policy agendas and has become a policy priority in many countries in recent years (OECD, 2006). Specifically, ECEC can help lay the foundations for future learning and skills development, producing higher quality outcomes for children (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010; OECD, 2006). However, reasons for the interest in ECEC services for children and their families have varied widely, and they have been increasingly seen as an investment and a tool to achieve policy goals (Urban, 2012).

The OECD has been very instrumental in outlining and underpinning European early childhood policies in most OECD member countries, such as Finland, Portugal or Spain, to (1) strengthen short- and long-term educational, social and emotional outcomes for children and (2) foster equity and social integration in addition to (3) promoting equal opportunities for men and women to participate in the labour force (OECD, 2001). Moreover, the OECD (2006) is aware that high-quality ECEC services boost children's achievement outcomes over time and they have identified five policy levers that encourage quality in ECEC: (1) establishing quality goals and regulations, (2) designing and implementing curriculum and standards, (3) improving qualifications, training and working conditions, (4) engaging families and communities and (5) advancing data collection, research and monitoring. The National PTA (1997) notes parent and family involvement is one of the most essential components to improve the quality of educational programmes. Correspondingly, family engagement in ECEC services is deemed important, and should be encouraged and valued, to build and assure services of quality in ECEC (OECD, 2006).

ECEC provision in Spain

Improving the quality of ECEC in Spain is a priority, as it is enhancing the contribution of ECEC to equity. Over the last decade, the Spanish government has emphasized the importance of high-quality and developmentally appropriate early childhood educational programmes by implementing national and regional education policies, expanding ECEC opportunities and improving early childhood education financing (Paz-Albo, 2015; Paz-Albo Prieto et al., 2017). The total number of schools providing ECEC as of 2016 is 22,404 with 14,601 public schools and 7803 private (and

state-funded private) schools. Total expenditures for the second cycle of public early childhood elementary schools in Spain in 2013 amounted to €5336 per full-time-equivalent student. This presents 22.1% of Spain's gross domestic product spent on education (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2016). Further, Spain's educational authorities provided purchasing power standard 1187 million for expanding ECEC services for children under the age of 3 (European Commission, 2014). While expanding education and increasing access to ECEC is important, family engagement is arguably a more important determinant of high-quality ECEC (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017; Snow, 2012).

In Spain, the government has been emphasizing the effectiveness of early childhood learning (Paz-Albo, 2015) and has introduced six years of preschool within the national education system (LOE, 2006). In Spain, child care provision has evolved since the 1990s and has expanded by implementing programmes such as *Educa3* to ensure every child has access to early learning opportunities by ensuring access to high-quality early childhood opportunities from the age of 3 months onwards. Children develop rapidly in their first years and the quality of the experiences has the most pervasive consequences for their development.

Spanish ECEC, which about 70% of all Spanish children attend, is a voluntary educational activity for children from birth through age 6 (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2016). For children between age 3 and 6 years, preschool is free of charge to ensure every child has access to an early education programme so they can succeed in school and beyond (Paz-Albo, 2015). Participation by children aged three to six years in ECEC is almost universal (European Commission, 2015). In fact, almost 100% of the 3–5-year-olds are enrolled in either government-dependent public schools (64%), government-dependent private schools (25%) or independent private institutions (11%) (OECD, 2013a). Also, the participation rate for 0–3-year-olds has risen consistently over time, to 39%, quite above the European Union countries average of 30% (European Commission, 2014; Paz-Albo, 2015). In Spain, national programmes, such as *Educa3*, are designed to support access to high-quality early learning childhood opportunities from birth through age 3 that meets children's developmental needs.

In Spain, ECEC has been a growing priority since the introduction of the National Organic Law of Education (*Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo*, LOGSE) in 1990. The LOGSE considered ECEC provision as an integral part of the Spanish educational system, recognizing its educational and pedagogical component, and it was introduced for the first time into the Spanish national system of education. Spain is a country with a highly decentralized system set in the 1978 Spanish Constitution, and thus ECEC providers hold a high degree of autonomy. Although the main education regulations are established at the national level, each of the 17 autonomous communities and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla are responsible for all aspects of education except for the objectives, standards and evaluation criteria established for all levels of education, including that of ECEC (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). In fact, current national educational regulations, including the new Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (*Ley Orgánica 8/2013 para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa*, LOMCE, 2013) guarantee the uniformity of the education system, while allowing regional educational authorities to make individual decisions in their respective territories. The LOMCE (2013), implemented during the fall of 2014, did not introduce any changes to the ECEC organization but reasserted the importance of this educational stage by establishing 'new governmental responsibilities regarding the objectives, skills and evaluation criteria for the core curriculum in early childhood education and care, and the promotion of multilingual education' (European Commission, 2015, p. 5).

ECEC in Spain has one of the highest enrolment rates among OECD countries (OECD, 2013a). Almost 2 million children, 0–6-year-old, are enrolled in ECEC programmes (see Table 1). They are organized into two cycles: the first cycle is for children ages 0–3 and the second cycle is for ages 3–6. At the age of 6, compulsory education starts in Spain. ECEC is provided by three types of educational institutions: public institutions (*centros públicos*), private institutions (*centros privados*) and state-funded private institutions (*centros concertados*).

Table 1. Number and percentage of ECEC students by educational setting and sex: School year 2015–2016.

	N	Sex		ECEC setting		
		Boys	Girls	Public Institutions	State-Funded	Private Institutions
First cycle (ages 0–3)	444,492	52.0%	48.0%	51.4%	15.4%	33.3%
Second cycle (ages 3–6)	1,362,128	51.6%	48.4%	67.7%	28.6%	3.7%
Total	1,806,620	51.7%	48.3%	63.7%	25.5%	10.8%

Source: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (2016).

Family engagement matters in Spain

In Spain, the role of families strengthened since the introduction of the General Law on Education and the Financing of Reform in Education (*Ley 14/1970 General de Educación y Financiamiento de la Reforma Educativa*, LGE) in 1970. Under this law, parental involvement in children's education is considered a fundamental right and obligation. Parents have the right to be informed and participate in decisions concerning their child. Legislation on education since 1970 furthered the emphasis of parental involvement focusing on the promotion of parental associations to enhance children's experience at all educational levels, including that of ECEC. As identified before, the involvement of parents in ECEC plays an important role in the development of young children (Hiatt-Michael, 2005; OECD, 2006; Weiss et al., 2008), and thus education administrations are responsible for adopting measures to increase parental involvement in schools.

Early childhood provision has been a growing priority in Spain since the early 1990s, and more attention is being paid to the quality of these services. Such priority is manifest by parents who formally and informally participate in ECEC service provision to improve children's educational success. Although the formal participation and influence of parents have been furthered by legislation in Spain, the question remains – what are the characteristics of quality in ECEC? Perhaps, as acknowledged by Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, and Waniganayake (2009) or the OECD (2013b) having a strong engagement component is critical to improve the quality of services provided. In fact, there is a growing awareness of the importance of promoting and enhancing collaborations between families and early childhood educators as a key quality issue (OECD, 2006). Evidence suggests that involvement of parents in ECEC service provision has long-term positive effects on children's cognitive development and academic achievement (Hujala et al., 2009; Peisner-Feinberg, 2007; Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010). More important, however, as Radzi, Razak, and Sukor (2010) suggest teachers' perspectives of parental involvement could affect the quality of teacher–family relationships.

Thus, given the primacy of both parents and ECEC educators during children's early childhood education this study focuses on the perspectives of early childhood tutors (i.e. ECEC teachers who care for and instruct young children daily in the classroom; in Spain, they are also responsible for the educational process of a group of students during the early childhood educational stage) on parental involvement across schools in Spain.

Purpose of the study

While emphasizing partnerships with parents is a key quality issue in service provision, no empirical analysis has parsed these data to understand the perspectives of ECEC tutors on parental involvement in ECEC settings in Spain. Such an analysis could help the educational community understand whether tutors believe parents are positioned to play a pivotal role to improve quality in ECEC in Spain. Through this research, the purpose was to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do ECEC tutors perceive parental involvement in Spain?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in ECEC tutors' views about parental involvement based on children's ages?

Method

The analyses described in this study were carried out using a fully integrated, de-identified dataset publicly available by the Spanish National Education Council (the *Consejo Escolar del Estado*, CEE) to assess parental school involvement. The database contains all the responses received to a questionnaire which was originally developed by the CEE in 2013 in order to investigate principals', tutors' and parents' perspectives on parental school involvement to strengthen the family-school partnership at all non-university education levels. For the purposes of this paper, the author will focus on the findings that relate to ECEC tutors' perspectives on parental involvement.

Participants

The research population were drawn by using stratified sampling, and the analyses utilize only the early childhood-level data from a sample of 156 ECEC tutors from a total of 65 ECEC centres across Spain. Thirty-six of the participants were eliminated due to incomplete raw data. Among the remaining 120 ECEC tutors from 63 ECEC centres, 7 (5.8%) were male and 113 (94.2%) were female. Consistent with the types of educational institutions providing ECEC services in Spain (see Table 1), 66.7% participants ($n = 80$) were from public institutions, 30% ($n = 36$) from state-funded private institutions and 3.3% ($n = 4$) from private institutions. The average age of the participants was 40.81 years ($SD = 10.077$).

Instrument and data analysis

In completing the survey questionnaire, ECEC tutors were asked in 69 questions to assess among other issues their perspectives on parental school involvement. Most of the formulated questions were assessed by using a Likert type 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *usually* and 4 = *always*). Survey data were analysed with descriptive tools, such as frequency analysis and cross tabulations using the software SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics 22). The author examined the results of the one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) to explore and test for differences among the three groups of ECEC tutors: group 1 = 3-year-olds tutors ($n = 40$); group 2 = 4-year-olds tutors ($n = 40$) and group 3 = 5-year-olds tutors ($n = 40$).

Results

The results are organized in two sections that look at dimensions of parental involvement and similarities and differences in tutors' perspectives: (a) parent-teacher communication and (b) parent-teacher collaboration in ECEC settings. Similarities and differences in tutors' perspectives across both dimensions were examined and statistically compared across the three groups of ECEC tutors.

Parent-teacher communication

Although nearly all parents (96.7%) attend parent-teacher conferences on a regularly basis and outside the regular scheduled conference time as needed, ECEC tutors believe (see Table 2) conversations with families allow time for discussing child's progress, strengths and needs ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .458$); child's personal and social development, interests and motivations ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .645$); and behaviour and attendance issues ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .816$). Further, 95% of tutors prefer face-to-face communication, and only 27.5% of tutors perceived barriers to parent involvement to a moderate extent, namely the lack of time on the part of the parents because of work-and-family issues. However, 28.3% of ECEC tutors stated that there is a parent class representative to maintain communication between parents.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of parent–teacher communication tutors’ perspectives.

Question item	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Total
	<i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	<i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	<i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	<i>M</i> (SD) (<i>N</i> = 120)
Families attend scheduled parent–teacher conferences.	3.53 (.554)	3.60 (.591)	3.50 (.555)	3.54 (.564)
Families request to confer with teachers when necessary.	3.35 (.662)	3.18 (.781)	3.15 (.834)	3.23 (.761)
Families attend group-class meetings.	3.23 (.620)	3.20 (.648)	3.18 (.594)	3.20 (.616)
I regularly keep in contact with families before or after school.	3.38 (.774)	3.65 (.580)	3.28 (.784)	3.43 (.730)
Parent meetings are satisfactory and helpful.	3.43 (.636)	3.38 (.667)	3.40 (.632)	3.40 (.640)
In these meetings, issues are covered adequately and in depth.	3.38 (.705)	3.53 (.679)	3.53 (.599)	3.48 (.661)
Families confer with other ECEC educators.	2.18 (.712)	2.08 (.829)	2.13 (.723)	2.13 (.751)
Parents confer with the centre management team members.	2.20 (.758)	1.88 (.563)	2.10 (.841)	2.06 (.737)
Families get together with their ECEC counselor.	2.00 (.641)	1.90 (.591)	2.30 (.723)	2.07 (.670)
Family participation in the centre is sufficient.	2.83 (.636)	2.78 (.832)	3.00 (.716)	2.87 (.733)
Family participation in the centre is constructive.	2.85 (.662)	3.03 (.862)	2.93 (.764)	2.93 (.764)
When communicating with families we talk about...				
their child’s behavior and attendance.	3.18 (.781)	3.25 (.809)	3.18 (.874)	3.20 (.816)
their child’s progress, strengths and needs.	3.68 (.474)	3.78 (.480)	3.78 (.423)	3.74 (.458)
their child’s personal and social development, interests and motivations.	3.55 (.639)	3.55 (.749)	3.60 (.545)	3.57 (.645)

In looking at parental involvement in the ECEC centres, it appears that family participation is not only sufficient ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .733$), but constructive ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .764$) as well. As shown in Table 2, ECEC tutors’ views towards their communications with parents are positive. The author conducted an ANOVA test to compare whether any of the three ECEC groups differed in their perspectives. This test revealed a significant effect of the group of tutors on the communication of families with their ECEC counsellor at the $p < .05$ level for the three conditions [$F(2, 117) = 4.06$, $p = .020$]. *Post hoc* comparisons using the Tukey honest significant difference (HSD) test indicated that the mean score for Group 2 ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .591$) was significantly different than Group 3 ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .723$). However, Group 1 ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .641$) did not significantly differ from Group 2 and Group 3 ($p < .05$). Taken together, these results suggest that 5-year-old tutors perceive that families make educational guidance and counselling an integral part of the teaching and learning process at their ECEC respective institutions.

Parent–teacher collaboration

Tutors tended to see parents engage in their collaborative efforts with ECEC institutions. According to tutors, parents are willing to participate in ongoing support, education and skills development opportunities but most times they are unable to participate due to time conflicts with work (48.3%). However, 10% of the tutors believe that parents are not interested in the ECEC centre’s activities. It is interesting to note that tutors perceive that parents actively cooperate and improve the education of their children, both at home and at school (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 3, it appears that parent–teacher collaboration is highly positive. Similarities in tutors’ perspectives were statistically compared across the three ECEC groups. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare whether any of them differed in their views. There was a significant effect on the belief that ECEC tutors hold on facilitating families taking ownership of their child’s ECEC centre at the $p < .05$ for the three conditions [$F(2, 117) = 3.88$, $p = .023$]. *Post hoc* comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .641$) was significantly different than Group 3 ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .385$). However, Group 2 ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .545$) did not significantly differ from Group 1 and Group 3 ($p < .05$). Specifically, our results suggest that 5-year-old tutors make families feel valued members of the educational community and empower them to assume ownership of their child’s ECEC centre.

Based on the means of ECEC tutors’ perspectives, tutors tended to recognize the importance of parent–school partnerships. Conversely, tutors have come to accept that despite their views that families are essential, there are some challenges needed to be addressed; they believe the low parental involvement at home is due to either parents lack of time (63.3%) or parents feeling they do not

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of parent–teacher collaboration tutors' perspectives.

Question item	Group 1 <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	Group 2 <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	Group 3 <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> = 40)	Total <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>N</i> = 120)
Parents support and supervise their children's homework.	2.88 (0.686)	3.13 (0.883)	3.05 (0.552)	3.02 (0.722)
Parents are interested in their children's attendance.	3.35 (0.770)	3.58 (0.636)	3.63 (0.490)	3.52 (0.648)
Parents encourage their children to participate in the ECEC centre's activities.	3.10 (0.778)	3.23 (0.862)	3.28 (0.679)	3.20 (0.774)
Parents promote cultural and educational activities.	3.05 (1.037)	3.03 (1.074)	3.03 (0.832)	3.03 (0.978)
Parents perceive the education of their children as an essential value.	3.20 (0.791)	3.10 (0.810)	3.38 (0.586)	3.23 (0.739)
Parents promote the autonomy and responsibility of their children in the study.	2.68 (0.764)	2.85 (0.921)	2.80 (0.723)	2.78 (0.804)
Parents encourage a good study climate from home.	2.78 (0.920)	3.10 (1.033)	2.90 (0.709)	2.93 (0.900)
Parents support me in my teaching role by respecting and collaborating in the decisions made in the centre regarding their children.	3.00 (0.716)	3.05 (0.639)	3.23 (0.660)	3.09 (0.674)
Parents facilitate the educational relationship with their children, especially when they have learning difficulties, conflicts...	2.93 (0.764)	3.05 (0.749)	3.18 (0.747)	3.05 (0.754)
I have received training on communication with families.	2.48 (0.933)	2.13 (1.137)	2.55 (1.218)	2.38 (1.109)
I promote parental involvement in the centre's activities.	3.53 (0.751)	3.83 (0.385)	3.63 (0.586)	3.66 (0.601)
I facilitate connections between families and other ECEC educators.	3.45 (0.815)	3.75 (0.494)	3.70 (0.464)	3.63 (0.621)
I facilitate my students' families to feel they are members of the educational community, taking ownership of their own centre.	3.50 (0.641)	3.60 (0.545)	3.83 (0.385)	3.64 (0.547)
I foster involvement with families, being available and ready to communicate and collaborate with them.	3.80 (0.405)	3.95 (0.221)	3.90 (0.304)	3.88 (0.322)
I encourage setting common goals with families so they can help support their child's learning at home.	3.68 (0.526)	3.73 (0.452)	3.80 (0.464)	3.73 (0.480)

possess the skills to help (32.5%) their children. The findings reveal that nearly all tutors reported that they promote meeting with families and collaborating with them ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .322$) and establish common goals so parents can support their child's learning and development ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .480$). Further, tutors assist families to connect with other ECEC educators ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .621$), and encourage them to participate in the ECEC centre's activities ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .601$). Finally, 27.5% of tutors reported that they have never received any specific training or professional development on parent involvement ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.109$).

Discussion

Findings suggest that ECEC tutors in Spain have a positive view of parental involvement and play a key role in supporting active school involvement that enhances the quality of ECEC programmes. Although the results do not point to specific dimensions of high quality that may be useful across ECEC settings, the findings highlight the demand for more professional development opportunities so tutors know how to effectively communicate and collaborate with parents to build stronger partnerships.

Overall, it appears that there are abundant benefits to be gained by seeking to engage parents in their children's education both at home and school. The results showed that ECEC tutors significantly differed in their perspectives of how often parents frequent counselling services and the importance of supporting families to assume ownership of their child's ECEC centre, but not in any of the other aspects analysed. Interestingly, tutors as a whole reported the belief that parents are interested in their children social and academic growth and development at these early stages.

The present study also shows that tutors saw parents as active in their participation in the ECEC centres. In fact, positive and constructive communication with parents is seen as an asset to build effective family–school partnerships. The findings also support the value of measuring family

engagement as a method to improve quality experiences in ECEC. In Spain, formal parent–teacher partnerships are regulated through national and regional education legislations to offer an opportunity for parents to influence ECEC services and strengthen relationships with ECEC centres and schools. In fact, ECEC services should foster supportive relationships that help build stronger families by increasing meaningful family engagement (Jor’dan, Wolf, & Douglass, 2012). Moreover, tutors recognize that parent–teacher meetings are useful and highly positive, and they play an important role in a child’s development and academic success. Here parent engagement is key to child success (Jor’dan et al., 2012) and it should have implications for legislated efforts to encourage effective parent involvement that supports children’s learning at home and school.

Although engaging parents and building effective family–school partnerships are critical, as mentioned earlier, ECEC tutors need special skills to succeed in involving families and establishing trusting collaborative relationships. Even though tutors recognize that parent involvement has a positive effect on student achievement, they acknowledge there is a lack of family engagement, mainly because of work schedule conflicts and work-and-family issues.

Conclusions

This study explores the perspectives of ECEC tutors about parental involvement throughout ECEC settings in Spain. Study findings suggest implications for the field of ECEC in Spain, and point to the need for increasing emphasis on parental involvement and engaging parents in educational partnerships within ECEC centres. The results show that fostering positive parent–teacher communication and collaboration during the early years is essential, and ECEC tutors are coalescing towards a greater involvement in children’s educations. It is suggested that possibly school personnel need to be more assertive in communicating to families the importance of their engagement.

Although parental involvement tends to be the greatest at the early stages, studies have shown that involvement at all age levels is equally important. Consistent findings for the importance of family engagement make policy and practice recommendations easy to develop. Future research in this area could include a wider and larger sample of ECEC programmes in Spain among other countries to better aid school improvement efforts to build more effective family–school partnerships and improve the quality of ECEC services.

These findings suggest that closer consideration of the potential benefits of continuity in parent involvement or the prospective deleterious consequences associated with lack of involvement over children’s early experiences is worthwhile and remain to be explored empirically. More research is also needed to better understand strategies ECEC centres can use to effectively facilitate engagement. When considering the quality of ECEC experiences, measuring parental engagement (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2015; Westmoreland et al., 2009) in addition to assessing other aspects of quality (see Ishimine et al., 2010; OECD, 2006) may provide a comprehensive picture of the quality of ECEC services.

Limitations

Results of the present study are tempered by a consideration of several methodological limitations. One limitation was the self-select nature of recruitment and the small sample size ($N = 120$) that limits the statistical power of the results. In addition, it is possible that the early childhood tutors that agreed to participate are more passionate about their views towards parental engagement than those who did not respond to all the questions. To minimize bias, *Ideas Claras S.L.* company was responsible for collecting the questionnaire data and coding it into an SPSS research dataset that was publicly shared via the CEE website for the research community to encourage multiple perspectives studies to move the quality of education forward (see National Research Council, 1999; Piwowar & Chapman, 2010, for more details on public-use of research databases to increase research efficiency and quality). However, studying a larger and more diverse sample may provide additional insights

and further validate our findings. Due to the limited generalization, further quantitative research is required to make use of and generalize the findings of the study. Moreover, future research might include qualitative measures of the tutors' perspectives, such as interviews and focus groups to complement quantitative findings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

Dr. Jesús Paz-Albo Prieto is the Graduate Program Director of the MA in Educational Management at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. His research interests focus on child development and care, educational technologies and teacher education.

ORCID

Jesús Paz-Albo Prieto  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7517-7124>

References

- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2015). *Progressing parental engagement in the ACT. Our evidence base. Measuring parental engagement*. Canberra, ACT.
- Bakken, L., Brown, N., & Downing, B. (2017). Early childhood education: The long-term benefits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(2), 255–269.
- Barnett, W. S. (1995). Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes. *The Future of Children*, 5(3), 25–50.
- Bartolotta, T. E. & Shulman, B. B. (2010). Child development. In B. B. Shulman & N. C. Capone (Eds.), *Language development: Foundations, processes, and clinical applications* (pp. 35–53). Sudbury, MA: Jones & Barlett Publishers.
- Burchinal, M., Vandergrift, N., Pianta, R., & Mashburn, A. (2010). Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25, 166–176.
- Desforges, C., & Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review* (Report No. 433). London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Edwards, C. P., Sheridan, S. M., & Knoche, L. (2008). Parent engagement and school readiness: Parent-child relationships in early learning. *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 60. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub/60>
- European Commission. (2014). *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe. Eurydice and Eurostat report: 2014 edition*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. (2015). *Education and training monitor 2015. Spain*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Hiatt-Michael, D. B. (Ed.). (2005). *Promising practices for family involvement in schooling across the continents*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental school involvement and children's academic achievement. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(4), 161–164.
- Hujala, E., Turja, L., Gaspar, M. F., Veisson, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2009). Perspectives of early childhood teachers on parent-teacher partnerships in five European countries. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 17(1), 57–76. doi:10.1080/13502930802689046
- Ishimine, K., Tayler, C., & Bennett, J. (2010). Quality and early childhood education and care: A policy initiative for the 21st century. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 4(2), 67–80.
- Jor'dan, J. R., Wolf, K. G., & Douglass, A. (2012). Strengthening families in Illinois: Increasing family engagement in early childhood programs. *Young Children*, 67(5), 18–23.
- Kwon, Y.-I. (2002). Changing curriculum for early childhood education in England. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(2), 19–28. <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n2/kwon.html>
- Landry, S. H. (2014). *The role of parents in early childhood learning*. Encyclopedia on early childhood development. Retrieved from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/parenting-skills/according-experts/role-parents-early-childhood-learning>

- Ley 14/1970, de 4 de agosto, general de educación y financiamiento de la reforma educativa. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, August 6, 1970, No. 187, 12525–12546. Retrieved from <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/1970/08/06/pdfs/A12525-12546.pdf>
- Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 9 de mayo, de Educación. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, May 4, 2006, No. 106, 17158–17207. Retrieved from <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2006/05/04/pdfs/A17158-17207.pdf>
- Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, December 10, 2013, No. 295, 97858–97921. Retrieved from <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2013/12/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2013-12886.pdf>
- Lindeboom, G. & Buiskool, B. (2013). *Quality in early childhood education and care*. Directorate-General for International Policies. Brussels: European Parliament.
- Loughran, S. B. (2008). The importance of teacher/parent partnerships: Preparing pre-service and in-service teachers. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 5(8), 35–38.
- McWayne, C., Hampton, V., Fantuzzo, J., Cohen, H. L., & Sekino, Y. (2004). A multivariate examination of parent involvement and the social and academic competencies of urban kindergarten children. *Psychology in the Schools*, 41, 363–377.
- Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Pender, E., Rentzou, K., ... Broekhuisen, P. (2015). *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on child development*. Report submitted to Brussels as part of the WP4.1 Curriculum and quality analysis impact review, CARE. Brussels: European Commission (No publishable version yet).
- Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. (2016). *Datos y cifras. Curso escolar 2016-2017*. Madrid: Secretaría General Técnica. Subdirección General de Documentación y Publicaciones.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2017). *A call for excellence in early childhood education*. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/policy/excellence>
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2009). *Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*. Retrieved from http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/pdfs/Guidelines_ENG/Practitioners_ENG.pdf
- National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force. (2007). *Taking stock: Assessing and improving early childhood learning and program quality*. Retrieved from <http://policyforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Taking-Stock.pdf>
- National PTA. (1997). *National standards for parent/family involvement programs* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED405405). Chicago, IL.
- National Research Council. (1999). *A question of balance: Private rights and the public interest in scientific and technical databases*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- National Research Council. (2001). *Early childhood development and learning: New knowledge for policy*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Newland, L. A., Coyle-Shepherd, D. D., & Paquette, D. (2013). Implications of mothering and fathering for children's development. *Early Child Development and Care*, 183(3-4), 337–342.
- OECD. (2001). *Starting strong*. Early childhood education and care. Paris: Author.
- OECD. (2006). *Starting strong II*. Early childhood education and care. Paris: Author.
- OECD. (2012). *Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. Paris: Author.
- OECD. (2013a). *Education policy outlook*. Paris: Author.
- OECD. (2013b). *Encouraging quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC)*. Research brief: Parental and community engagement matters. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/49322478.pdf>
- Paz-Albo, J. (2015). Early learning in Spain. *Childhood Explorer*, 2(1), 22.
- Paz-Albo Prieto, J., Cvencek, D., Herranz, C. V., Hervás, A., & Meltzoff, A. N. (2017). Preschoolers' mathematical play and colour preferences: A new window into the development of gendered beliefs about math. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(8), 1273–1283. doi:10.1080/03004430.2017.1295234
- Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. (2007). *Child care and its impact on young children's development*. Encyclopedia on early childhood development. Retrieved from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/child-care-early-childhood-education-and-care/according-experts/child-care-and-its-impact-young-1>
- Piwowar, H. A., & Chapman, W. W. (2010). Public sharing of research datasets: A pilot study of associations. *Journal of Informetrics*, 4(2), 148–156.
- Powell, D. R., Son, S. H., File, N., & San Juan, R. R. (2010). Parent-school relationships and children's academic and social outcomes in public pre-kindergarten. *Journal of School Psychology*, 48, 269–292.
- Radzi, F., Razak, M., & Sukor, N. (2010). Parental involvement in school to improve academic achievement: Primary teachers' views. *International Journal of Learning*, 17(9), 259–270.
- Snow, K. (2012). *Research news you can use: Family engagement and early childhood education*. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-family-engagement>
- Topor, D. R., Keane, S. P., Shelton, T. L., & Calkins, S. D. (2010). Parent involvement and student academic performance: A multiple mediational analysis. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 38(3), 183–197.
- Urban, M. (2012). Researching early childhood policy and practice. A critical ecology. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 494–507.

- Weiss, H., Caspe, M., & Lopez, M. E. (2008). Family involvement promotes success for young children: A review of recent research. In M. M. Cornish (Ed.), *Promising practices for partnering with families in the early years* (pp. 1–20). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Westmoreland, H., Bouffard, S., O'Carroll, K., & Rosenburg, H. (2009). *Data collection instruments for evaluating family involvement*. Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/data-collection-instruments-for-evaluating-family-involvement>