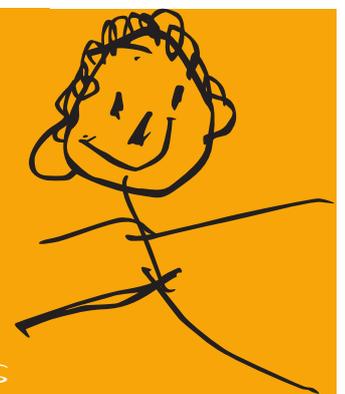


# Early Education



*Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021*

- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





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- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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# Teachers' perceptions of fathers' participation in early childhood education in New Zealand

Parisa Tadi and Amir Sadeghi

*Fathers' participation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been recognised to have a positive influence on young children's and their families' well-being. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes have been reported to be a factor that potentially impacts on fathers' participation. The current study investigated teachers' perception about fathers' participation in ECE and further suggested ways to enhance fathers' participation. To this end, 100 teachers working in ECE centres, ranging from relief teachers to managers, were asked to complete a questionnaire. The findings showed that 87 percent of ECE teachers from various age groups, qualifications and teaching roles feel satisfied when they have more communications with fathers and believe fathers need to be involved in ECE programmes.*

## Introduction

The review of the relevant practice and theories of father-teacher partnerships in Early Childhood Education (ECE) highlights the importance of fathers in child's well-being and outcomes. Fathers' participation may predict a good start in children's life-long learning as well as providing a male role model in children's development (Potter et al., 2012; Sarkadi et al., 2008). However, fathers' participation has been reported to be low, which could be due to teachers' lack of skills to create opportunities or make efforts to engage fathers in ECE programmes. Additionally, a low rate of fathers' participation in ECE centres' programmes could be due to a lack of gender balance among teachers rather than lack of

interest from fathers (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Given the importance of fathers' role in early years education, the presence of fathers should be seen as a useful resource contributing to the quality of education and care in ECE (Maxwell et al., 2012). Research indicates teachers' preference of mothers' participation to fathers'; the area that is worth to be considered since fathers' role in children's development is vital, too (White et al., 2011).

Levine (1993) has outlined four factors leading to low rates of fathers' participation in ECE, including fathers' fears of exposing inadequacies, ambivalence of staff members about fathers' involvement, maternal gatekeeping, and inappropriate programme design and delivery. McBride et al. (2001) have explored issues related to these factors, including the need for training and support services, mothers' role, creating a climate for fathers' participation, and the need to proceed slowly but continuously to meet fathers' needs. Given that all these factors and issues can be linked directly or indirectly to teachers' perceptions and expectations, the starting point to consider fathers' participation is to investigate teachers' beliefs and attitudes (Stonehouse, 2012).

The current study investigated: a) teachers' understanding of fathers' skills; b) how fathers may participate in centre's programmes; and c) how ECE programmes can enable fathers' participation in the programme and

educational life of their children. These aims were formulated to the research questions below:

- i. How do teachers in New Zealand perceive fathers' participation in ECE centres?
- ii. What do teachers consider as barriers and facilitators for fathers' participation in ECE centres?

## Methodology

The present study utilised a descriptive research design to explore the perspectives of the participants. The data were collected via a questionnaire modelled on existing questionnaires (e.g., Green, 2003; Lamb et al., 2011; White et al., 2011). The developed questionnaire was validated and was named the Father Participation Questionnaire (FPQ). The FPQ aimed at tapping into paternal issues in ECE education.

The FPQ was developed to investigate factors associated with fathers in ECE centres in New Zealand. This questionnaire aimed to assess teachers' beliefs about fathers' participation rather than the level of fathers' participation. The FPQ comprised 69 items addressed five distinct factors including Teachers' Attitudes (TA), Teachers' Biases (TB), Paternal Centred Professionalism (PCP), Paternal Competence (PC), and Facilitating Conditions (FC) to capture teachers' perceptions, expectations and desires regarding fathers' participation. The factors are briefly described next.

Teachers' attitudes towards fathers' participation have been unanimously considered as an important factor in ECE which may facilitate or hinder fathers' participation (Epstein, 2018; Green, 2003). The questionnaire utilised seven items to measure teachers' attitudes toward fathers' participation in ECE centres. The items were intended to assess how teachers perceive various aspects of fathers' participation including positive feelings towards fathers' role and skills regarding their children's education and development.

Teachers' bias has been recently recognised as a potential concern for fathers' participation in ECE centres and calls for further research. The second factor in the questionnaire intended to address teachers' recognition of their biases that may hinder fathers from participating in childcare centres. Research has shown that fathers' participation may increase when teachers are aware of their own feelings about fathers' presence in ECE. Previously, scholars considered teachers' feelings and perceptions as a factor that influences their relationships with fathers (White et al., 2011).

The Paternal Centred Professionalism factor was an attempt to investigate teachers' efforts to engage fathers in the centre's activities. Fathers seem to participate more in ECE if programmes are associated with male figures and components (Palm & Fagan, 2008). It is also expected that fathers will be more likely to participate in ECE programmes if they feel valuable and important for their children's education. Likewise, the centre's approaches and programmes could also affect fathers' participation (White et al., 2011).

The Paternal Competence factor highlighted a different way in which fathers may promote their children's development and their roles in the centre. It is reported that characteristics of fathers may reflect their participation in educational programmes (Downer et al., 2008). Characteristics such as fathers' confidence in their parenting skills may contribute to fathers' participation in ECE programmes. Likewise, according to teachers' perceptions, parenting competence has been considered as a factor that may reflect parent-teacher relationships in ECE (Kahn, 2006). Hence, it is important to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding fathers' parenting skills and how it may impact children's development.

The fifth factor, Facilitating Conditions, was to provide insights into the level of support provided by the centre's programme to assist teachers in their efforts to facilitate fathers' participation, and into how the existing programmes may support fathers' participation. Facilitating conditions are

considered as teachers' aspirations to involve fathers in activities. Facilitating fathers' participation in ECE centres requires efforts from teachers and the centres' programmes. Such efforts may facilitate teachers' knowledge and understanding of male figures to enhance their participation in the centres. Additionally, despite the importance of teachers' communication and relationships with fathers being reported (Mitchell et al., 2006) there are still diverse perceptions about the quality of teachers' communication with fathers. Additionally, father-teacher communication may be influenced by ECE programmes, the family culture, etc. To have more descriptive responses on teachers' perceptions about their communication with fathers, six embedded questions were added to the FPQ questionnaire to address teachers' feelings on how often they communicate with fathers and how often fathers visit the centre.

### **Sample**

The FPQ was piloted on 57 ECE teachers. The questionnaire was slightly modified including

deletion of a few ambiguous questions. A list of ECE centres and associations was prepared from the data obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education. Among associations, Kidsfirst in Canterbury (comprising 58 centres) accepted to participate in the study. Centres in Christchurch were contacted directly to invite them to participate in the study. Overall, 25 centres participated in the study. Additionally, the invitation for participation was posted on websites and media for NZ ECE centres such ECE Forum and Men in ECE in NZ, where teachers could voluntarily participate in the study using the electronic version of the questionnaire developed in Qualtrics, with the subsidiary aim of comparing teachers' perspectives from private and government-based sectors. One centre from Rotorua accepted to participate in the study, too. The participants could choose to complete the questionnaire either online or via the paper-based version. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

**Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.**

Gender	Total	100% (n= 100)
	Female	87% (n= 87)
	Male	13% (n= 13)
Age	Mean (Standard Deviation)	32.6 (0.84)
Education	University Degree	78 (n= 78)
	Certificate	22 (n=22)
Ethnicity	European/Pākehā	75% (n=75)
	New Zealand Māori	10% (n=10)
	Asian	9% (n= 9)
	Others	6% (n= 6)

Fifty eight percent of participants worked for private-based centres and 42 percent worked at government-based centres. A large proportion of the respondents (76%) had full-time jobs. Approximately 75.percent of the respondents were teachers, including relief teachers and student teachers, while 25 percent of the respondents had managerial and

coordinating positions. Overall, 78 percent were registered teachers.

### **Results**

Mean and standard deviations amongst the five factors' scale scores and the answers to each question from the Fathers Participation Questionnaire were computed to examine

distribution of the answers given by the participants. Table 2 presents the mean and the range of the scores for each factor. Overall, the mean values demonstrated the highest value for the first factor (i.e., teachers' attitudes) indicating that respondents were mostly positive about the importance of fathers'

participation. The results also demonstrated the lowest value for teachers' biases indicating that fathers' participation is highly valued in ECE (Scores above 3 were considered positive and below 3 negative).

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics of factors' scale scores factors.**

	Number of Items	Mean	Range
(Number of the respondents=100)			
Teachers' Attitudes	7	4.37	25-35
Teachers' Biases	14	3.15	30-59
Parental Centered Professionalism	18	3.67	51-85
Parental Competence	14	3.48	30-61
Facilitating Conditions	14	3.63	40-64

Regarding Teachers' Attitude, teachers were asked to report their perceptions towards fathers. Almost all teachers agreed that fathers are important in their children's education and have roles in their children's behaviour development. Similarly, teachers mainly had positive attitudes to communicating with and working alongside fathers.

The scores for Teachers' Biases were slightly lower than the results obtained from other factors in the questionnaire. This indicated that teachers seldom recognise their own biases. Respondents seemed to have predispositions regarding the centre's programme and mothers' attitudes. A large number of teachers (74%) disagreed with the influence of mothers' attitudes and centres' programmes on fathers' participation.

When the respondents were asked about Parental Centred Professionalism, they reported the need for professional attempts from centres to increase fathers' presence. Almost all teachers reported that fathers are spoken to in centres. When teachers were asked if they sought 'help from fathers' and whether fathers were involved in the enrolment forms asking them to participate in the centres' events, only a minor group of the respondents

believed that fathers have been given responsibilities in the events in their centres. A majority of the teachers agreed that they should encourage fathers to come to the centre to help. Most teachers reported that fathers' pictures can be seen in their children's portfolios, while only a few teachers reported that they have organised a fathers' group in their centres, such as a fathers' working bee group. The participants strongly supported inviting fathers for educational programmes. They also reflected that centres should consider fathers' interests and needs. Collecting information about fathers, even if they live apart from their children, was another aspect that teachers seemed to unanimously agree. However, the participating teachers seemed reluctant to invite fathers to the centres without mothers. It is also unclear, regardless of the issues in relationship to custody of children, whether ECE centres send separate invitations/information to parents who do not live together.

In regard to Paternal Competence factor, the findings showed while 75 percent of ECE teachers in New Zealand recognise mothers and fathers equal in their parenting priorities, about 60 percent of teachers believe mothers are naturally more sensitive and caring.

Teachers also favoured fathers' participation in the events held in their ECE centres. They considered that fathers have different parenting styles and agreed that children enjoy spending time with their fathers. Fathers seem to ask about their children's daily routines too which can be interpreted as showing they are interested in participating in their children's education. When teachers were asked whether fathers' presence in the centre might influence risk-taking skills for girls, they were neither positive nor negative.

Regarding Facilitating Conditions, teachers mainly disagreed about using a different choice of words when talking to fathers, in spite of agreeing that different communities need different approaches. Overall, the respondents expressed positive perceptions to different approaches that may help fathers be involved more in the centre.

Further analyses were conducted to examine the respondents' difference in each of the five factors addressed in the questionnaire considering their demographic variables including gender, education, position, experience, type of centre and working hours.

The results of an independent sample t-test for gender showed no significant differences among the factors ( $p > .05$ ). Additionally, no difference was evident in factor scores among centre managers and teachers ( $p > .05$ ). Results also showed no difference in teachers' education ( $p > .05$ ); (i.e., those with certificates and those with university qualifications who were all registered teachers in New Zealand), and participants' experience ( $p > .05$ ) (i.e., those with less than five years and those with more than five years). Likewise, there were no differences among the participants' place of work ( $p > .05$ ) (i.e., those who work in private centres and those working in government-based centres), and also for working hours ( $p > .05$ ).

The results from the four embedded items in the measure showed that 87 percent of teachers were satisfied that they would see more than five fathers in a week. The results demonstrated that teachers are more satisfied when they have opportunities to communicate with fathers. As shown in Table 3, a higher rate of satisfaction is obtained when they could see fathers in the centre more and communicate with them.

**Table 3. Results of cross-tabulation analysis.**

Participants' satisfaction			
Frequency of communication	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied
1–2 times	23.1	46.2	30.8
3–5 times	26.3	26.3	47.4
More than 5 times	13.6	18.2	68.2

## Discussion

### *Teachers' biases*

The findings of the current study highlighted the need for teachers' awareness of their biases, which may affect fathers' participation. Research examining fathers' participation in ECE programmes has reported teachers' biases as a potential concern (Schwab et al., 2020; White et al., 2011). Biases may influence

teachers' perceptions and the levels of support they provide for fathers' participation in ECE centres. Teachers' biases have been considered as an influencing factor for fathers' participation in ECE. That is, teachers firstly should be aware of their own biases so they can adopt strategies to be more professional. Given that having a higher rate of fathers' participation is based on creating an ongoing communication with fathers and becoming

aware of their needs and interests (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006), teachers' awareness of fathers' comfort zones and efforts to provide a father-friendly environment to meaningfully encourage fathers' participation seem crucial to support them in their children's educational programmes.

The findings also showed that while mothers are naturally more sensitive and caring, majority of ECE teachers in New Zealand believe that mothers and fathers are not very different in their parenting priorities. This finding seems relatively contradicting the international research highlighting that fathers and mothers demonstrate differing parenting skills (Peterson, 2014). This is an interesting area to be further investigated in the New Zealand context.

Another finding highlighted marriage satisfaction as an influencing factor in fathers' participation. While father-mother relationships (also known as marriage satisfaction) has been reported as important (Kwok et al., 2013; Saracho & Spodek, 2008), teachers participating in the current study overall did not notice this factor; only a small number of teachers considered it, with many others expressing no views on this. This finding should be interpreted cautiously as the current study did not investigate marriage satisfaction in depth; perhaps future studies looking into this factor may provide more in-depth understanding.

### ***Teachers' perceptions of facilitating factors***

The results showed that while New Zealand ECE teachers are aware of the importance of fathers' roles in children's educational and physical development, encouraging fathers' participation in ECE centres is still needed. Fathers' participation in ECE may enhance improvement of the parental partnership required by *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand ECE curriculum) (Ministry of Education, 2017). Since 90 percent of early childhood teachers are female in New Zealand (OECD, 2020), like many other parts of the world, encouragement of mothers' participation has attracted more

attention (Ancell et al., 2016). To facilitate fathers' participation, consideration should be given to fathers' perceptions, interests and comfort zones by inviting them to share their ideas with ECE teachers.

Additionally, according to the participating ECE teachers in this study, gender balance in staffing has been considered as a facilitator of fathers' participation in ECE centres. Teachers reported that the presence of more male staff in ECE centres may help fathers feel more comfortable in participating in the centre. The presence of male teachers in ECE centres has been reported in previously published studies in favour of the argument that male staffing may change the centre's environment to the benefit of fathers' participation (e.g., Farquhar, 2012).

Another feature with regards to improving fathers' participation in ECE is getting to know fathers better. The findings of the current study suggested that training teachers to develop skills in working with fathers and in collecting information about fathers is important. Teachers in this research considered collecting information about fathers and correspondence with fathers as facilitators of fathers' participation. It was also evident that even fathers who no longer live with their children (e.g., single-parent children) should be contacted if there are no issues around the child's custody.

In New Zealand, father-teacher partnerships (parent-teacher) are regulated by the *Te Whāriki* principles and strands (Ministry of Education, 2017), which is the gazetted curriculum. In this partnership, ECE centres are encouraged to offer opportunities for parents to feel a sense of belonging, so they participate in centres' programmes. Teachers perceived that ECE centres consider the facilitating conditions encourage fathers' participation in ECE centres.

The principle of Family and Community (Ministry of Education, 2017) requires the community and family to integrate with children's learning journeys. Communication with fathers and their contribution in their children's education is important for both

children and their families' well-being and sense of belonging to the ECE centre. One strategy to encourage fathers' participation is that programmes could facilitate fathers' engagement with their children's education. For example, inviting fathers for shared reading with their children in the center (Daddy Book Club, see Soleimani Tadi, unpublished thesis) which may enhance fathers' skills in reading to their children. Additionally, customising activities for fathers in the centre seems to be helpful. For example, "Father Photo Map" for Father's Day would depict photos from father-children's interactions during drop-off and pick-up times or/and play during the day. Such father-centred programmes seem to have two advantages. First, fathers may feel a sense of belonging and importance in their children's education. Second, they might learn new skills or implement something that would like to do with their children.

Teachers identified recognising cultural and local characteristics of communities as important. Additionally, fathers in New Zealand are not a homogenous group (Callister & Fursman, 2013). Thus, their needs and interests differ from one community to another depending on the local context. This highlights the importance of understanding local community needs to engage fathers in ECE programmes.

### *Teachers' perceptions of barriers*

The results of the current study revealed that fathers' working hours and schedules should be considered as barriers to fathers' participation. Fathers' time and work schedules are clearly considered as barriers in paternal studies (Freeman et al., 2008). In fact, such barriers could affect father-teacher communications, fathers' spending time with their children, and fathers' participating in centres' events. Based on the published research on fathers, most parental activities organised by ECE centres take place during the business hours of centres which typically coincide with fathers' working hours. Hence, it is suggested that ECE teachers encourage fathers' participation by arranging activities out of fathers' working hours (e.g., an

evening event), or ask fathers about convenient times to increase chances of fathers' participation in the centre's programmes. This also could show the importance of considering fathers' needs before developing programmes. Furthermore, from another perspective, it shows that ECE centres mainly focus on the needs of the traditional family where the father works and the mother stays at home. However, the reality is far more complex given that there are various types of families with both the mother and the father working or the father staying home while the mother works outside. Fathers' fear about their own parenting skills (e.g., Ihmeideh, 2014) has not been identified as a barrier in this study. Fathers are seen as competent parents by ECE teachers with fathers identifying confidence in taking care of their young children.

## **Practical implications**

Based on the findings of the current study, successful engagement of fathers in ECE programmes can be improved by teachers and centre managers utilising strategies and techniques compatible with fathers' comfort zone to enhance fathers' participation in ECE centres, such as parent-teacher interviews where specifically both mother and father are asked to attend. It is also useful to add both parents (mother and father) in the contact list. Usually in the information list, there is space for a main contact person; this could change to father contact and mother contact details. Asking fathers about the best way of communication that they prefer such as text, email, letter, etc. and sharing the child's story or centre information with both parents are also other ways that could lead to improved engagement.

The findings of the current study also suggested some potential practical approaches to improve partnerships between ECE teachers, fathers and whānau/families. Encouragement is a crucial consideration for effective fathers' participation. When working with fathers, it is important to consider how fathers may feel comfortable about being conversed with. ECE teachers might utilise strategies to initiate

conversations with fathers related to their jobs to make fathers feel a greater sense of belonging and more comfortable in participating in centres.

Recognising and managing teachers' biases should be considered since teachers' biases may negatively influence or hinder fathers' participation in ECE programmes. While teachers may perceive their knowledge, skills, and abilities sufficient to work with fathers, the findings of the current study suggested that ECE teachers should set aside their biases and embrace suitable strategies to support fathers' participation in ECE programmes. Further investigations into teachers' perceptions of factors that facilitate fathers' participation seem necessary.

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