DUTIES OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS IN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract. Education of young children is a joint responsibility of parents, teachers and school community. For the effective implementation of inclusive education, in many countries educational policy emphasizes the role and responsibility of parents, and treats them as integral partners in developing a more inclusive system, where the decision-making and the responsibility needs to be shared among educational partners. Parents play a vital role ensuring welfare and education of their young children and the pivotal part in shaping the identity and values. Because parents are familiar with the needs, problems, gifts, and abilities of their children, staff should involve parents as much as possible in the planning of the individual programs, providing education, care, interventions and support to children. By building relationships with parents in their children 's lives, teachers contribute to the creation of safe learning environments for children. In partnership, all partners share responsibilities, power and the decision making as well as mutual trust and respect. The term "partnership" captures the idea that responsibility for children is shared across all three contexts of home, school and community[21].

Keywords: children with special educational needs, inclusive early childhood education, parent- teacher cooperation, shared responsibilities, community of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education, as outlined in the European documents[17], is a response to the widespread social, economic and political changes in Europe, as well as a means of establishing a caring, humane and egalitarian society. The introduction of this policy will, however, require extensive changes in early childhood education and care, as the focus shifts from children adjustment to the demands of the system, to the system's capability to accommodate all learners' needs as inclusively as possible. This means that the collaborative effort of every role-player in developing the new system is critical. Parent- school partnerships that allow parents to become active participants rather than passive observers of their children's education should, therefore, be fostered. The understanding of experiences parents, including these from diverse social economical, and cultural backgrounds, and those who have children with disabilities, could contribute to a richer description of the nature of inclusion, and could ultimately inform the process of involvement of parents as partners in the development of both inclusive education system and a community. Also, it could better facilitate collaboration between parents and schools. The authors of this paper aimed at assessing the realized and expected early childhood education practices in inclusive pre-school settings with a particular focus on family-teacher cooperation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of parents in inclusive education of young children

The first institution of a child where he/she learns is his/her home. Children spend most of time with their parents and learn from them, and the environment provided by their parents at home. Parents play a vital role in the education of their child; whatever child's age is. Although a parent's role in their children's learning evolves as children grow, one thing remains constant -

parents are their children's learning models. Parental involvement is important for the education of children of all ages, but it is critical for the success of young children in inclusive settings[14]. Through guidance parents help their children organize their time and support their desires to learn new things inside and outside school. Parent need to be a positive role model for the child in helping to shape the child's attitudes about learning. Parents' attitudes towards education can inspire children and show them how to take in charge of their own learning. The literature on achievement consistently has shown that parent education is important in predicting children's achievement[16, 9]. Family process models have examined how parenting behavior, such as the structure and the dynamics of home environment, influence children's achievements[20]. The majority of the literature on parent education pertains to the direct, positive influence on achievement. Research on parenting also has shown that parent education is related to a warm social climate at home. Researchers examined two broad aspects of family mediators: learning stimulation and parental responsiveness, and found, that maternal education had the most consistent direct influence on children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes with some indirect influence through a cognitively stimulating home environment[5, 6]. Others have focused on specific behavior such as harsh parenting, nurturing, and warmth[22]. Parenting can be frustrating, in particular, while raising a child with special educational needs. Early childhood education and care has the potential to help families enhance their skills, prevent child abuse and neglect, and foster positive childhood experiences. When dealing with opposing parents, it may be beneficial to consider the role of parents in their child's education in order to guide them in an appropriate direction. By recognizing the roles of parents in their child's development and education, and offering them support to reach these roles, staff members are communicating to parents that their role in their child's education is valued. It is recognized, that family involvement has a powerful influence on well-being of children.

Parent – teacher cooperation in inclusive early childhood education

Most European countries in their steering documents emphasize the importance of partnership with parents and encourage settings to include specific measures in their planning[18]. It is recognized, that one of the tasks of teachers with regard to parents is to initiate a dialogue, share information and ensure that parents take a part in the education of their children and understand its importance. An effective partnership among early childhood education, care and intervention providers, families and the wider community can benefit children's learning in a number of ways. The support of parents, for example, can be particularly beneficial. Parents can assist children in their learning and help staff to better understand their needs. Expertise from a wider community may help to improve the effectiveness of settings, ensure better use of resources and enable extra-curricular activities to be delivered. For these reasons, many countries encourage early childhood education practitioners to work closely with their stakeholders to support children's development, learning and general well-being[18]. Professionals working with young children and their families must recognize and respect their cultures, ethnicities, languages, values, faiths, and belief systems, and thus be able to effectively support children's development and learning. Professionals working with young children must acknowledge the role families play in child's life and strive to form respectful partnerships to generate trust and open relationships so that children thrive in settings outside their own homes. By working together, staff and parents can create and maintain high-quality education for children. The importance of productive partnerships among parents, families, schools, and broader communities in maximizing children's engagement and achievement, is

recognized by educational policy makers in all European countries and beyond. Family-school and community partnerships are re-defining the boundaries and functions of education. They enlarge parental and community capacity and create conditions, in which children develop and learn effectively[24, 25]. Beyond educational achievement, parental engagement is associated with various indicators of children's development. These include as follow: better social skills, better self-esteem, improved behavior, a greater sense of personal competence and identity, higher aspirations and motivation towards learning. Children with special educational needs and those from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals work together to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture in school. Children whose parents remain involved usually make better transitions and are less likely to drop out of school[28, 25]. Parental engagement is beneficial not only for the children, but for the families as well, as parents increase their interaction with their children, they are more responsive and sensitive to their children's social, emotional, and intellectual developmental needs, and are more confident in their parenting and decision-making skills. As parents gain more knowledge of children's development, there is more use of affection and positive reinforcement and less punishment of their children. Parents are more aware of, and become more active regarding policies, that affect their children's education, when parents are requested by school to be part of the decision-making team. When pre- schools have a high percentage of involved parents in education of their children, teachers and principals are more likely to experience higher morale. Parents' consistent involvement leads to improved communication and relations among parents, teachers, and administrators. Teachers and principals acquire a better understanding of families' cultures and diversity, and they form deeper respect for parents' abilities and time[28, 29]. Family involvement is not a fixed event but a dynamic series of interactions that vary depending on the context in which they occur, the disciplines from which the collaborative team members are drawn, the resources parents bring to the interactions, and the particular needs of the child and the family[35]. Traditionally, the educational settings have developed means to support parents' involvement. However, parents have a limited power to define their roles and actions[35]. They are often expected to agree with and support already existing structures and actions. Parents who agree with the school and get along with the existing model are seen as 'good enough'. Those who disagree are considered 'problematic' or 'difficult'. There is a growing move to incorporate parents into child assessment process[7, 2]. Research suggests that one of the most effective ways of detecting developmental delay in young children is via parent information[15, 27]. Parents are often the first to suspect their child might have a developmental problem, and their concerns should always be taken seriously: 'they may not understand the significance of their observations but they are very efficient at detecting that something is amiss'. Parent's concerns for their children's development can to be accurate indicators of true developmental problems, regardless of differences in the parents' education and child-rearing experience[11, 25]. Parents can provide two broad types of information about their children's development and behavior[11]. They can share their concerns and they can describe their children's past and current functioning. The mentioned practices are consistent with family-centered approaches to the working with parents. Family-centered practice and family-centered care are now recognized as the cornerstone of effective work with parents and families[23]. Active family involvement and support have been identified as a key element to the success of inclusive early childhood education programs relating to better outcomes in the education of young children with and without disabilities[19, 31, 14]. Parents' involvement is also related to teachers' actions. Specific

teachers' invitations were significantly related to parents' involvement, particularly among minority and low-income families[1]. When parents perceived that their participation was desired by teachers, they would often overcome obstacles to be involved.

Communities of practice

The concept of community of practice has its roots in the social theory - it seeks to reveal the social nature of human learning[4, 33, 34]. Communities of practice are based on provisions of the theory of situated learning, common meanings, values, attitudes, and knowledge, which is being created in communities, the sense of social identity, and possibilities for active participation. Communities of practice are characterized as groups of people involving representatives of various professions for the purpose of mutual activities; they are united by common professional interests, they strive for the same aims, share common values, knowledge, problems, search together for their solution. Communities of practice provide an opportunity to integrate work and learning. They are related to learning from each other and creation of practical knowledge aiming at common interests, mutually acting and collaborating. This provides an opportunity to learn from successful practice, develop shared competence and identity, and create an innovative inclusive early childhood education and care practice. Collaboration-based community of practice is characterized as bearing dominating value attitudes – shared and equal power, dialectics and negotiation. Communities of practice are aimed at diversity of points of view, active participation of everyone, making of common solutions and common perception of "myself", "others'", "our" - what is possible through an inclusive dialogue only. Engagement in social contexts involves a dual process of meaning making: people engage in activities, conversations, reflections, and other forms of participation and produce conceptual artefacts-words, concepts, stories, documents, etc., that reflect their shared experience and around which they organize their participation. Artefacts without participation do not carry their own meaning; and participation without artefacts is fleeting. At each moment people bring them together anew to negotiate and renegotiate the meaning of their experience. The process is dynamic[34]. Early childhood community of practice provides an opportunity for discussion, collaboration, and exchange of ideas and resources related to young children, particularly for those who have developmental challenges and are being served by the system of care communities[12]. Through networking and cooperation opportunities, the system will be better able to provide the necessary assistance to children in need and their families. In Lithuania, in early childhood education and intervention the development of communities of practice is still emerging, and this peer-to-peer exchange among practitioners and parents has a great potential to impact the field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the analysis of the results obtained in 2015−2016 employing the online questionnaire 'Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education'. The instrument includes the following topic areas: leadership, assessment, environment, family, instruction, interaction, collaboration, and transition. The original instrument has been supplemented by the open- ended questions requiring the comments of the participants. The overall research has been implemented in two stages: the first stage of the research aimed at a qualitative analysis of the comments of the participants using the content analysis method, while the second stage aimed at exploring the realized and expected early childhood education and intervention practices and identifying main tendencies through the ordinal Likert scale questions. The article is based on the data obtained in the second stage of the research. The data obtained via

the qualitative analysis of the participants' comments to the open-ended questions has been used as an illustration and interpretation of quantitative data. In the article, the focus on family-teacher cooperation in early childhood education has been taken into account after the comments of the participants have been analyzed and the most challenging areas to be further analyzed have been identified. The evidence obtained via the qualitative analysis of the participants' comments shows that a family is an essential member of the team to achieve mutually agreed outcomes and goals that promote family competences and support the development of a child. Taking into account the importance of the family role in child's development and education, the cooperation with family's needs to be strengthened, particularly, in the following areas: assessment, instruction, relationships with a family, leadership, and transition. Considering the assumption mentioned above, the authors of the paper aimed at assessing the realized and expected early childhood education and intervention practices in inclusive pre-school settings, particularly, focusing on family-teacher cooperation. The three main issues relating to teachers' collaboration with family have been analyzed in this paper: 1) teachers' collaboration with parents during child's assessment and education process (environment, instruction and transition); 2) teacher- parent relationship and family-centered support; 3) shared roles of teachers and parents in a team. Descriptive statistics has been applied for data analysis aiming at revealing the prevailing tendencies of the realized and expected early childhood intervention practice. The group of respondents consisted of 215 participants, including pre-school leaders (25.5%), teachers (28.6%), speech and language therapists (24%), special needs teachers (7.1%), social pedagogues (4.1%), psychologists (3.6%) and other professionals (16.8%). Participants represented all sectors of early childhood education, care and intervention in Lithuania: comprehensive kindergarten (52%), specialized kindergarten (24%), early childhood intervention centers (5.1%), other institutions (18.9%). Most of respondents had higher education: a Bachelor's (47.4%), and a Master degree (37.8%).

ETHICAL ISSUES

The research was conducted under the general principles of ethical research, what is closely related to reliability and validity of presentation and analysis of theoretical and empirical data. When carrying out the empirical research, the principles of justice, the right not to be exploited and offended, fairness, maintenance of privacy of research respondents were followed. The respondents conveyed information on the aims, character and proceeding of the research in the introductory part of the questionnaire. Participation in the research was based on voluntary consent. Respondents were promised that the obtained data would be encoded and the research results would be presented confidentially, retaining anonymity of a person.

The family-centered approach to early childhood education and care is defined as a work of professionals with a family and for a family[29]. The family-centered practice is valued by families because, in comparison to other models, this support makes an impact on strengthening parental skills, knowledge and competences. The creation of a positive relationship between parents and specialists should be based on mutual trust, support and respect to cultural values of families and diversity of children's education[26, 13].

Relations between parents and professionals are based on equality as well as common understanding, shared vision, tune of expectations and responsibility when making joint decisions, which are essential for partnership and working in a team[30, 3].

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the research present the real and expected situation of parents' and teachers' collaboration in early childhood education and intervention settings. Collaboration between teachers and parents in Lithuania is recognized as a principle which should be realized in child's assessment and education, teachers' and parents' relationship, also shared roles in a team. The teachers' expectations on the practice prove the presumption that there is still the need to improve the practice in particular areas. Collaboration between teachers and professionals is mainly realized while exploiting child's family as an information source for the assessment. Professionals show attempts to report the assessment results to parents in an understandable manner, but, however, teachers' pay insufficient attention to identification of family preferences for the assessment and performance of the child's assessment in a cooperative, reciprocal trust-based way. Collaboration between teachers and parents is highly realized in many areas of educational process. Teachers aim at education based on child's strengths and interests. They seek to engage him/her into active learning. Provision of the support which requires addressing the child's and family needs is less successfully implemented in practice because of limitation of services for young children and their families. The regulation of services system is still challenging, in particular relating to transition which is necessary to support successful adjustment and positive outcomes for both a child and a family. The limitations in legal regulation of cross-institutional collaboration in the country are evident. In the early childhood education practice teachers make a lot of efforts to follow the principles of family-centered practice grounded on the building of trust-and-respect-based relationship and responsiveness to the family concerns, but still they meet a lot of challenges. A clear gap of realized and expected practices is identified aiming at working together to develop individualized plans and implement practices that address the family's priorities and concerns, engage a family in opportunities that strengthen parenting skills, supporting the family how to access and use (in)formal resources. The reality of practice, while sharing the roles and responsibilities between teachers and parents, aiming at the joint work in the team is most questionable. The data shows teachers' intentions to create a community of practice within organizations, but uncertainty if the parents are considered as members of this community still remains. Teachers and families are hardly working together as a team.

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