

A Review of *Relationships with Families in Early Childhood Education and Care: Beyond Instrumentalization in International Contexts of Diversity and Social Inequality*

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Joanne Lehrer, Fay Hadley, Katrien Van Laere, and Elizabeth Rouse, the editors of *Relationships with Families in Early Childhood Education and Care: Beyond Instrumentalization in International Contexts of Diversity and Social Inequality*, have curated a collection of 15 chapters that foreground diverse voices and perspectives of parents, educators, and children that move away from harmful discourses and positionings, and that work towards creating and sustaining democratic relationships. The book is part of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association's (EECERA)¹ book series, *Towards an Ethical Praxis in Early Childhood*, and was borne out of conversations within the EECERA Working with Families special interest group.

Within international contexts such as Canada, Belgium, India, Singapore, Germany, and Australia, the chapters of the book provide examples of parent and educator relationships, skillfully weaving together theory, practice, reflection, and praxis in ways that allow one to see new possibilities for working alongside parents, families, communities, and children. The chapters are organized around three sections, *Disrupting Partnerships*, *Parent Perspectives*, and *Innovative Enactment of Partnerships*. The series editors, Tony Bertram and Chris Pascal, begin with a preface to situate this book as an important contribution to the growing critique of “neoliberal discussions of education,” with specific regard to parent partnerships and the role of parents in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (p. xiv). The forward, written by Michel Vandembroeck, provides a historical snapshot of education regarding achievement gaps, inequality, underachievement, and oppressive educational systems that put the blame and sole responsibility of educational success on the individual. Vandembroeck goes on to emphasize the urgent need for books such as this one that provide alternative strategies wherein parents and educators share in the responsibility of educating children.

The introduction and conclusion written by the editors both contextualize the book and summarize other ways of thinking about the themes, topics, and elements within each chapter. In the introduction, the editors describe the chapters as “possible alternatives to the instrumentalized role of parents and families, focusing on ethical, social, and rights-based rationales for engaging with families” (p. 1). Within the field of ECEC, Lehrer et al. (2023) propose the need to move beyond the instrumentalization of parents as recipients of education or as bodies who work to progress and/or support the agenda of ECEC centres. Instead, they contend that educators and researchers should establish authentic reciprocal relationships with parents, families, children, and each other. Lehrer et al. (2023) provide a window into the typical understanding of parent involvement within the field of ECEC. Partnerships with parents have been seen as an investment in a child's future success, as “a contributing asset to society and the economy” (p. 1) and the responsibility of parents to initiate. A lack of parent involvement has been blamed on individual parents. However, the editors bring forth a plethora of research that works towards troubling this notion showing that parents may face a variety of obstacles such as institutional racism and feelings of being unwelcome in ECEC spaces that impedes the develop of partnerships. The introduction serves to bring forth theory and research that supports the topics and studies presented in the subsequent chapters, thus creating a shared understanding in regard to the terms and concepts utilized.

The first section, *Disrupting Partnerships*, focuses on barriers to creating meaningful partnerships in ECEC, such as educator practice (Chapter 1), the instrumentalized role of parents (Chapter 2), stereotyped gender roles (Chapter 3), lack of children's perspectives (Chapter 4), and the perceived challenges and deficits within remote communities (Chapter 5). In the second section, *Parent Perspectives*, the chapters highlight diverse parent voices in relation to racial and cultural identity (Chapter 6), deep listening (Chapter 7), difficult emotions (Chapter 8), and parent roles (Chapter 9). The final section, *Innovative Enactment of Partnerships*, draws attention to relationship-building strategies that have been implemented within ECEC centres internationally. The focus areas include creating access to culturally relevant resources (Chapter 10), collaborative and supportive environments (Chapter 11 and Chapter 13), decolonizing practices (Chapter 12), respecting difference and diversity (Chapter 14), and heart connections (Chapter 15). To conclude, the editors reflect on how the chapters “add to our understanding of democratic partnerships?” (p. 187). Lehrer et al. (2023) review important elements of resonance between and across chapters such as the value of family knowledge, respect for diversity, supportive community, importance of local context, and listening to understand. The authors provoke us to think about the systems and policies that must be re-imagined and the courage and leadership needed in order “to do things differently” (p. 189).

This book has incorporated many international voices attesting to the importance of respecting diversity while building relationships between educators and parents. Jan Peeters (Chapter 3) writes about the marginalization of fathers within ECEC settings and practice, explaining that mothers are generally understood to hold knowledge of parenting and children, and male role models are often lacking in ECEC settings. Patricia Hall and Rachel Berman's work (Chapter 6) focuses on the perspectives of Black mothers, the racial socialization practices they engage in with their children, and the lack of resources (such as picture books and toys) within many ECEC settings, that depict the everyday lives of Black families. Angela Chng (Chapter 9) takes a look at the roles of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and domestic helpers in the education of children in Singaporean culture. Through an anonymous questionnaire to parents, the author found that there were opposing opinions on whether or not grandparents and domestic helpers should be part of ECEC-parent partnerships. Lennie Barblett and Caroline Barratt-Pugh (Chapter 10) explain a book gifting program which ensures that Indigenous resources are accessible to the community. The chapters highlighted above provide an accessible understanding of barriers to partnerships, the support needed for parents and educators, and ways to move forward when working in diverse communities. However, as the editors pointed out up front there is a lack of 2SLGBTQIA+ representation within the book which is unfortunate. Although diversity is embraced in terms of racial identity, cultural differences, and gender roles, some non-traditional families are also absent. This means that building relationships with blended families, families who have adopted or who foster children, and so forth are not mentioned. Of course, there is no way of including every kind of family, however, educators often struggle with bridging the gap with families that differ from their own so these exclusions might be addressed in future editions of this volume.

This reviewer is particularly drawn to the chapters that work towards dismantling or troubling divides between Indigenous and settler communities. These chapters in particular are encouraging for educators working in colonized countries such as Canada, where this reviewer lives and works. Lisa Provencher, Andrea Maurice, and Kim Rud (Chapter 12) describe how they embarked on a learning journey centred on decolonizing the transition from childcare to school. The authors uncovered ways in which institutional forms, typically used to seek information from

families, can be reconstructed so that families feel empowered to share their stories and knowledge instead of feeling constrained and silenced. Bernadette Hayes (Chapter 13) focuses on moving away from enrolment criteria that promotes a negative discourse about families and instead they have described an ECEC centre in Australia, situated in a predominantly Indigenous community, that focuses on the strengths and unique qualities that each family possesses.

Reading literature about parent partnerships, it quickly becomes clear that terms and definitions overlap and, at times, are contradictory. It was refreshing to read that each of the chapters within this book built on the notion of *reciprocal partnerships* wherein parent knowledge and educator knowledge are valued equally. This book beautifully merges theory and practice in ways that inspire action and reflection in its readers and, for this reason, would be of interest to educators, teacher educators, university students, and researchers alike. It demonstrates how work being done internationally to break down barriers and bring forth diverse perspectives yields contextualized strategies that can be taken up and adapted to many global settings. In closing, this reviewer appreciates how the editors have created a diverse collection of chapters that does not read as a one-size-fits-all guide to democratic partnerships.

Reference

Lehrer, J., Hadley, F., Van Laere, K., & Rouse, E. (Eds.). (2023). *Relationships with families in early childhood education and care: Beyond instrumentalization in international contexts of diversity and social inequality*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://www.routledge.com/Relationships-with-Families-in-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-Beyond/Lehrer-Hadley-Laere-Rouse/p/book/9780367417581>

¹ The European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) is a non-profit organization committed to supporting international research focused on early childhood education. Visit <https://www.eecera.org/> for more information regarding resources, research, and up-coming events and conferences.