

Chapter 12

(Re)theorisation of More-Than-Parental Involvement: New Directions and Hopes



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Abstract When engaging in the re-theorisation of parental involvement (PI), we searched for theories that would (1) embrace more-than-parents as potential collaboration partners, (2) recognise the role of the family in the child’s (educational) life, and (3) allow for the possibility of overcoming the “democratic deficit” (Van Laere et al., *Eur Early Childhood Educ Res J* 26(2):187–200. , 2018, p. 189), by which we mean the possibilities for families to co-create the modalities of their engagement with ECEC settings. The literature review presented in Chap. 2 mapped out the theories employed in research on PI and showed that those theories and models born out of interpretivist aims (i.e. to understand) and critical objectives (i.e. to challenge unjust power relations) have the potential to capture the increasing diversity of families and embrace the unfolding modalities of their engagement in diverse social, cultural, and material contexts. Based on the review, particular theories were chosen and explored in later chapters of this book. In this concluding chapter, we provide a theoretical overview by pointing to new directions for the theorisation of more-than-parental involvement that are relevant to the ECEC field and the creation of sustainable futures.

Keywords Parental · Intergenerational · Participation · Decolonization · Rethorisation

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Embracing More-Than-Parents

By embracing *more-than*-parents, we intend to highlight (1) the diversity of family configurations, with all the attachments and relationships that are significant for the child; (2) the role of intergenerational relationships, particularly between young children and older adults; and (3) the agency of materiality, artefacts, and the more-than-human agents involved in PI. The “more-than” thus refers to more than just parents, and more than just the human elements constituting the practice of PI.

Diverse Family Configurations

Before writing this book, we assumed that diversity with respect to family configurations is generally accepted, particularly among new generations of pre-service teachers. During our work with the book one of us conducted an exercise among 120 early childhood teacher education (ECTE) students at the University of Zagreb, and just like the studies of Heilman (2008) and Kušević (2017), the task the students were given was to draw an “ideal family” (individually) and discuss it in groups. The exercise was anchored in visual research methodology, which allowed the students to confront their embodied knowledge and tacit assumptions about the ideal of a family (Heilman, 2008; Kušević, 2017). The tacit assumptions that became explicit in the pictures surprised us all, as 90% (108) of the drawings presented heterosexual couples with two children (2 + 2), with clear gender identities (usually a boy and a girl), and in some cases a dog. The other 10% (12) also drew the 2 + 2 model with the use of abstract lines or shapes (e.g. hearts or circles). Domination of the traditional family ideal opened up pathways for discussion on the students’ future collaboration with parents and families who did not necessarily fit into the generated pictures (see examples in Figs. 12.1 and 12.2).

This experience underlines the importance of continuous reflection and challenging one’s own pre-assumptions, both when it comes to “who” the family of the child is that the ECEC will co-create collaboration with, but also with respect to the ways in which the collaboration will take place. Potential avenues through which to support such deep reflection can be found in the critical approaches discussed in Chap. 10. Theories of discourse enabled us to unmask the discursive hegemonies (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) underlying our taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings, and narrative inquiry made us aware of the danger of one story (Ewick & Silbey, 1995) and the importance of understanding others’ experiences through stories (Clandinin et al., 2016). Both approaches seem to be relevant conceptual tools for continuously unbiassing the (research) practice of PI.

If a deep understanding of contextual, social experience is at stake, then theories that see the individual as intertwined and entangled within a particular context are also very relevant. Here, we would like to underline the significance of the cultural-historical wholeness approach (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Hedegaard, 2005, 2009,



Fig. 12.1 Student drawing no. 1 of an “ideal family”. (Source: Own visual data)



Fig. 12.2 Student drawing no. 2 of an “ideal family”. (Source: Own visual data)

2012, 2014; Hedegaard & Fler, 2008) and attachment theories. Attachment theory was revealed in Chap. 2 as a practised way of conceptualising PI; however, due to our limited experience with the approach, it was not discussed in a separate chapter. What attachment theory and the cultural-historical perspective have in common is the focus on the relationality in which a human life is constituted. While the cultural-historical wholeness approach highlights the context of the historically changing societies and institutions to which individuals relate through motives and activities (see Chap. 3), attachment theory emphasises the importance of one's first attachments and explains how they shape our way of approaching increasingly diverse relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1997; Yellin & White, 2012). As attachment is not an abstract phenomenon, but rather a deeply contextual and cultural one, there are different patterns of attachments to various numbers of caregivers valued and practiced across cultures (Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). By acknowledging the importance of the child's first connections, and the way they develop into new relationships (e.g. in the context of ECEC), this theoretical approach embraces the families as they are, in all their complex configurations. For instance, one particular possibility that this theory allows for is the tracing of the toddler's/child's attachment to ECEC professionals as a facilitator of the attachment between ECEC and the family.

While the cultural-historical wholeness approach would rather explore the development of the dialectical connections between the child, the family, and ECEC through the motives developed in relation to cultural values and societal demands, attachment theory allows for a deep focus on unique human-human relations. Attachment theory focuses on (multiple) connections between people, which we find particularly relevant for studying more-than-parental involvement in the case of very young children and toddlers during their transitions to ECEC settings. These transitions of attachments, including the attachments being established between more-than-parents and the ECEC staff, is a little-researched phenomenon, and since it can vary significantly from culture to culture, we see it as an interesting direction for future research.

Intergenerationality

The next important aspect that comes into play when embracing more-than-parents is the intergenerational relationship. In the context of Indigenous families, this notion may be used to honour the important, but usually dislocated, relationships between elders (ARACY, 2016; Hayes et al., 2009). In the case of non-Indigenous families, there seems to be a trial involved in joining generations that modernisation separated from each other:

In the Western world, children live in a separate world from older people. Apart from family members, they don't come into contact with older people. So, this is a way of bringing them into contact with older people, other than grandparents. For older people, it brings something

new, and brings life to them. —Leila, coordinator, “The Dice: Young Meet Old”, the Netherlands (The Toy Consortium, 2013, p. 3)

Particularly in times of increased migration and diaspora formation, even the children’s contact with their own grandparents cannot be taken for granted; ideas of joining the children and older adults from the same localities should be accruing (Oropilla, 2020, 2021; Oropilla & Ødegaard, 2021).

Theories that seem to resonate with the intergenerationality of the family and easily allow for the presence of more generations of adults to become engaged with a child are those that embrace the complex and relational context of the child. Such theoretical models include the cultural-historical wholeness approach, ecological systems theory, attachment theory, agential realism, the theory of practice architectures, and Epstein’s models of overlapping spheres as potentially productive parental toolkits.

While the cultural-historical wholeness approach facilitates the description of such intergenerational interactions as interpersonal or interinstitutional, thus serving particular values, ecological systems theory accounts for these interactions as another collaborative activity on the mesosystem level, as is evident in the work of Oropilla (2020, 2021). The theory of attachment could potentially be employed to track the established (intergenerational) attachments as they are transferred to ECEC settings; it could also be used to examine the new attachments being established as children and the elderly come together.

Another theory that could embrace the intergenerational aspect seems to be one of practice architectures. It could offer a way of conceptualising the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements (called *sayings*, *doings*, and *relatings*; see Chap. 9) as constituting diverse practices that facilitate intergenerational meetings. This theory’s ability to embrace social practices in their ecologies with other practices could also account for intergenerational meetings as they occur in the institutional practices of old-age homes.

One more concept that interestingly opens for intergenerational collaborations is the concept of a family’s *vibrancy*. *Vibrancy* embraces the “family’s linguistic, cultural, vocational, artistic, social, emotional, spiritual, and ethnic dimensions” (Preston et al., 2018, p. 549). According to Preston et al. (2018), such a notion should be included in the types of involvement suggested by Epstein (1995; Epstein et al., 2019). While this idea of vibrancy inspires one to embrace the family’s intergenerationally as their socio-emotional, ethnic, and spiritual resource, it also extends and dynamically adapts the other well-established theoretical toolkits.

Agential realism offers a way of describing such meetings as vibrant entanglements of more-than-humans intra-acting together(apart) and acknowledges the essential role of materiality. The care and ethics of our existence are implied by the fact that our being-with-the-world is mutually constituted in intra-actions, and this idea could also become a conceptual toolkit for describing the ethical standpoints behind the facilitation of intergenerational practices. Agential realism can also be interpreted as a potentially decolonising theorisation, as it questions the core of Western ontologies (Barad, 2007, 2010; Murriss, 2016; Murriss & Osgood, 2022) and

thus creates a basis for the deep acknowledgement of Indigenous and non-Western ontologies.

Moving one step further into theoretical decolonisation, researchers from non-Western countries can explain how their local philosophies could be employed as ways of theoretically understanding intergenerational engagements across ECEC and other institutions or in less formal settings. In this vein, Oropilla and Guadana (2021) describe the great potential of Philippian perspectives to inspire the conceptualisation of intergenerational connections.

The Agency of the Materiality, Artefacts, and More-Than-Human Agents Involved in PI

The role of the material context is accounted for by cultural-historical approaches, as well as posthuman perspectives. The cultural-historical approach has a long tradition of describing *artefacts* as mediating human learning and engagement with cultural values and other humans (Rogoff, 2003; Wartofsky, 1979). By recognising the material aspect of cultures, this theoretical approach allows us to think of culturally responsive practices as involving artefacts and the ECEC space.

However, in Chap. 2, an article by Nagel and Wells (2009) reports on the honouring of a family's culture through artefacts based on an adjustment of Epstein's (1995) model to the contexts of Indigenous families. Originally, Epstein's model did not focus on cultural responsiveness or artefacts; in this case, it was transformed to meet the intentions of the authors and the needs of the participating groups.

A theory that has a clear connection to Indigenous ontologies, but which is (strangely) not used in relation to them is, according to Rosiek et al. (2020), posthumanism. As presented in Chap. 11, the radically relational ontology of posthumanism can empower ECEC staff to try out very courageous material-based practices that, without this theoretical language, would not be justifiable. Acknowledging humans and non-humans as belonging to the same matter overcomes the dichotomy between humans and non-humans and allows for more-than-parental involvement to be understood as the intra-active entanglement of more-than-humans bearing organic ethical responsibility for each other's existence.

Acknowledging the Families' Part

Theories that allow us to acknowledge families as a genuine *part* of the network around the child, and thus the practice of PI, seem to be those associated with social capital (Coleman, 1998), as discussed in Chap. 5, and the idea of quality as meaning-making (Dahlberg et al., 2013), which is briefly presented in Chap. 10. The theory of social capital, by focusing networks and the common benefits of being together,

implies an understanding of each member as a potential benefiter and resource for others, and thus recognises the genuine *part* that parents have in their contact and collaboration with ECEC and other parents.

The theory of ECEC quality as meaning-making recognises and respects all actors' perspectives and meanings, and through this process, the families (but also the professionals, children, owners, and other possible stakeholders) are assumed to be agents co-creating a good (meaningful) ECEC and a good (meaningful) life for the children and the broader community (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Another theory acknowledging the parents' *part* in both the children's lives and ECEC is the theory of attachment. In valuing the primary attachment between the child and the caregiver, it has great potential to provide new insights into and understandings of more-than-parental involvement and partnerships between ECEC and families. This primary attachment is the one growing from the organic connection (to family) that the child brings into the institutional context of ECEC.

The acknowledgement of an organic and genuine parental *part* of PI is also related to the competences and understandings of ECEC professionals. Aware of the demands for different qualifications of the various ECTE programmes that exist around the world (Boyd & Garvis, 2021), we point out the general necessity of socio-emotional competence (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Talvio et al., 2015) and awareness of one's own prejudices (Evans, 2013) in establishing partnerships both with families and other actors. In this sense, Pedro et al. (2012) show how throughout history, professionals' attitudes towards families in education have been rather negative. Nevertheless, these attitudes seem to be important to work on. In a related study, Deslandes et al. (2015) show how different attitudes towards parents are represented by teachers who perceive themselves as un/successful in their work with parents, and that those who experience successful collaboration exhibit the attitude that partnerships with parents are an organic part of their work as ECEC professionals.

Another format for acknowledging that families constitute a *part* of PI is the research mapping of socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and logistical barriers to the participation of families with lower socio-economic status or im/migrant backgrounds (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008; Eliyahu-Levi, 2022; Leareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999). Bourdieu's social theory (1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) emerges here as a theoretical toolkit that is helpful for understanding how schools, by acknowledging and serving the middle-class habitus, exclude parents who do not fit with their hidden expectations. However, as described in Chap. 8, this theory might also be used to describe how parents, by using different forms of capital (e.g. economic, cultural, or social), can negotiate relationships with the ECEC setting. Furthermore, narrative scholarship may also be used to present families' lingual and cultural practices as counternarratives that challenge the deficit discourse on migrant and Indigenous families (Ejuu & Opiyo, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2021).

Overcoming (or acknowledging?) the Democratic Deficit

In our view, the future of research on PI must overcome the “democratic deficit”, identified by Van Laere et al. (2018) as the “goals and modalities of parental involvement” being created “without the involvement of parents themselves” (p. 189). A theoretical approach that is sensitive to the eventual deficit of participation or experiences of meaninglessness in collaboration with ECEC is the conceptualisation of ECEC quality as meaning-making, developed by Dahlberg et al. (2013). In their focus on the dialogical creation of meaning, Dahlberg et al. (2013) assume that the honest and respectful sharing of one’s own perceptions, experiences, and opinions is the essence of a meaningful practice. As this approach recognises various stakeholders – not only parents and professionals, but also children, owners, and other relevant professionals – as important voices, overcoming the democratic deficit in this way also extends to parents.

As presented in Chap. 10, dialogue and dialogue-based involvement may turn out to construct an arena that, regardless of one’s own intentions, silences other-than-verbal articulations and ways of being and participating in the ECEC community. However, theories of discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) related to Dahlberg’s et al. (2013) approach to ECEC quality are able to capture the hegemonies of meaning and unmask how the “obviousness” of dialogue is created. Discourse theory’s sensitivity to both social discourses and individual narratives allows us to capture cases in which the experiences of individual families are excluded from or challenge discursive hegemonies.

An interesting approach to overcoming the democratic deficit is implied in Biesta’s (2004, 2006) concept of the *other community*, or a *community of those who have nothing in common*. Such a community is created by challenging the rules of rational communities characterised by the codes and expectations of what and how can be articulated. The *other community* constitutes itself as an arena in which every participant is exposed as possessing an unpredictable and unique voice, which obligates one to stay responsive to what is articulated and thus become responsible for the community.

When tracing the power relations between parents and education, Mendel (2020), inspired by Foucault’s theory, distinguishes between power relationships that are “strategic games between freedoms” (Foucault, 1988, p. 19; Mendel 2020, p. 94) with the aim of influencing behaviour, and those that are established relations of domination. Mendel (2019) recognises educational institutions as creating real spaces for democracy understood as games between different freedoms that have a potential of challenging the established relations of domination. Furthermore, Mendel (2019) portrays democracy in an educational settings as a non-consensual form of governance, already imposed on parents/families as a way of collaboration. From such a standpoint, it is quite impossible to talk about a democratic deficit, as, according to Mendel (2020), the deficit is a part of democracy itself. As power relations are unavoidable, Mendel (2019, 2020) suggests using it in the best possible

ways, such as through the development of change-making partnerships between empowered schools, families, and communities.

From Collaboration to Partnership

The partnership of families and teachers represents the most desirable type of collaborative relationship between the home and ECEC. Partnership is characterised by equality, responsibility, two-way communication, and action towards a common goal (Maleš, 2015). It is a relationship that assumes active participation, mutual support, and joint learning based on mutual respect and trust. Developing partnerships takes time and the willingness of all involved to be part of the process. The teachers' competence and the families will seem to be of particular importance in the context of education. Despite a great body of research showing the importance of establishing educational partnerships (Hornby, 2000, 2011; Epstein, 2001; Whalley, 2007; Patrikakou, 2016), developing them in the social practice of ECEC is difficult.

Ideal partnerships are characterised by reciprocity and mutuality. Dunst et al. (1994) claim that reciprocity is a prerequisite for achieving the most desirable form of collaborative relationship – that is, a partnership. Trust, a phenomenon described as a catalysator of social relationships, interactions, and transactions (Sztompka, 1999, 2007), is also important for transforming cooperation into partnerships. When it comes to the development of trust in cooperations, Downer and Myers (2010) emphasise time and effort as key factors. This means that trust-based relationships are built gradually and appear more quickly if the ongoing contacts are characterised by openness and respect – as in the case of the *other community* (Biesta, 2004). Given that cooperation between parents and teachers is motivated by a common goal and mutual benefits, it is legitimate to expect that all parties will make some efforts to facilitate a faster development of trust.

Conclusion

When re-theorising more-than-parental involvement as an acknowledging, culturally responsive, and democratic practice (Biesta, 2004; Mendel, 2020; Van Laere et al., 2018; Vandenbroeck, 2009), which serves the values of the rights of the child (UN, 1989) and social sustainability (Årlemalm-Hagsér & Elliott, 2017; Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Davis & Elliott, 2014; Eriksen, 2013; Hägglund & Johansson, 2014; Samuelson & Park, 2017), we underline the importance of theories that allow us to capture the contextual and relational dimensions of partnerships between ECEC settings and more-than-parents. The diverse theoretical perspectives of psychological, sociological, and philosophical origins explored in this book are thus an invitation to employ more than just models, and to reflect on the conceptual toolkits

and what they allow (and do not allow) one to perceive and reflect on. We conclude with an articulation of our hope for more theoretisations to come, inspired by non-Western perspectives, that respect and create meaningful attachments and embrace both intergenerational and material matters. Our hope also extends in the direction of ECTE and theories embracing the processes through which pre-service teachers can be taught to form partnerships with more-than-parents.

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