

## Promoting fathers' participation in early learning centres.

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Fathers' participation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been recognised to positively influence young children's and their families' wellbeing (Rollè et al., 2019, White et al., 2011). This study examined the influence of a father-focused program designed to increase their participation in the early childhood education setting where their child is learning. Four early childhood centres agreed to participate in the research. Twelve fathers of the centre's children volunteered to participate in the program that aimed to support fathers' interaction with early childhood centres. The findings suggested that such a father-focused program in ECE centres may improve fathers' overall participation in early childhood centres and contribute to enhanced father interaction with centres. The results are discussed within a parental partnership model, and the practical implications of the findings are highlighted.

Keywords: Early learning centres, fathers' participation, father-focused program.

### Introduction

Early Childhood Education has become an important part of children's early learning experience (Green, 2003; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006; White et al., 2011) primarily due to the societal changes that require both parents to work. About half of the children around the world aged zero to four years attend early childhood services (UNICEF, 2019). In New Zealand, this figure is reported to be 68% of children aged four attending early childhood for 10 or more hours per week (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2021). Given the importance of parents and early childhood teachers in the educational development of young children (Ansell et al., 2018; McBride et al., 2001), it is crucial to find ways to keep parents involved in their children's daily educational programs (McBride & Rane, 2018). A large body of published research has supported parent participation and its positive impacts on children's academic success (Hornby, 2011; Palkovitz, 2005; Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Additionally, parent participation in children's early years' education and their partnership with early childhood centres may contribute to children's educational attainment (Palm & Fagan, 2008). Research on fathers' participation in early childhood programs would be useful (McBride et al., 2017; Tadi & Sadeghi, 2021). The subsequent section reviews research highlighting the important role of parents and teachers in early childhood education.

### ***Partnership model***

The most appropriate model to define relationships and partnership between teachers and parents appears to be the "partnership model" in which teachers are viewed as experts in education while parents are viewed as experts in their children. Relationships between these two parties such as teachers and parents, can be viewed as a partnership that involves sharing expertise and control (Hornby, 2011). The model also focuses on wellbeing, empowerment and holistic development for children. In early childhood, the partnership is a shared understanding that assumes both the teacher and the parent have equal status and contribute to the child's experience (Duncan & Te One, 2014). Research shows that these partnership approaches are more likely to be effective when teachers and parents work alongside each other with positive attitudes and experience trusting engagement connections, and a commitment to one another while maintaining a balance between individual needs and differences and cooperation in caregiving (Duncan et al., 2005; Hedges & Gibbs, 2005). Such views are consistent with those of Epstein (2011), who proposed the "overlapping spheres of influence" approach. In this approach, there is an overlap between the education system, family, and community spheres which influences children's achievements. Epstein's model suggests that relationships between these three spheres may result in academic and social benefits for children. Teachers should welcome all family members, not just those that are easy to reach, and think about programs and services that accommodate family members' needs and realities.

### ***The benefit of fathers' participation in early childhood education***

Given that the early childhood sector is female-dominated (more than 90% of teachers in early years education centres are women: OECD, 2020), fathers' participation in early childhood programs is viewed important to provide young children with a male role model in their development (Farquhar, 2012; Tadi & Sadeghi, 2021). The male role model has been suggested as, a) the traditional masculinity, for example someone who is able to do masculine jobs such as drilling holes and putting hooks on walls, b) an embodiment of discipline that is someone with authority and power, and c) an alternative, gentler form of masculinity such as someone who can perform a range of activities that might not be considered masculine in the traditional view such as cooking (Cameron, 2006; Sargent, 2005).

Fathers' participation in early childhood education has been identified as beneficial for children's educational development (Ansell et al., 2018; McBride & Rane, 2018; Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Fathers may participate in children's activities in a different way from mothers, which means that they may contribute in a unique way to children's social skills development, highlighting their role as caring figures to familiarise children with different aspects of the world (Downer et al., 2008). Research has suggested that fathers' engagement in play predicted different types of children's behaviour as well as their cognitive development (Ramchandani, 2021). Ansell et al. (2018) suggest that the language that fathers use with their young children is more direct than that used by mothers, and that fathers are more likely than mothers to verbally challenge their children. Ansell et al. (2018) also reported the effectiveness of involving fathers in weekend, afternoon and sports activities in early childhood centres. They also argued that children who have learning difficulties benefitted from fathers' participation in early education centres. Hence fathers' participation in early childhood centres can be viewed as important to increasing exposure to male role models for young children in their early development (Cameron, 2006; Sargent, 2005).

A sufficient body of published research has contributed to the increased awareness of the need for fathers' participation in early childhood education (Ansell et al., 2018; Green, 2003; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006; McBride et al., 2001; McBride & Rane, 2018). Fagan and Day (2014) identified factors such as parental skills, parents' and teachers' educational levels, the child's gender, maternal engagement in the program, mothers' gatekeeping and beliefs as influencing factors of father participation. In another study, Kwok et al. (2013) highlighted that fathers' beliefs about their participation also affect their participation. However, research that determines how to encourage fathers' participation in early childhood centres seems underdeveloped. Most research perspectives have focused mainly on how to increase partnerships considering centre-parent partnerships.

Centre-parent partnerships can be implemented and examined at the level of early childhood centres and for fathers' participation, for example, when a head teacher/ECE manager invites all parents to a meeting or sends communications to all families. Centre-parent partnerships can also be viewed at the individual level. For example, when a family and an ECE teacher meet in a parent-teacher interview or when they converse with each other on the phone. Social interaction models can be used to examine connections between teachers/centres, families and communities (Epstein, 2011), but a specific focus on fathers' participation in early childhood settings is lacking (Tadi & Sadeghi, 2021; Tekin, 2012). Within the framework of a partnership, teachers can establish a more family-like educational environment, which can be enhanced with an increasing rate of parent participation. A family-like ECE centre considers each child's individuality, making each child feel special and included. Such family-like educational settings should be open to all parents (mothers and fathers), not just those that are easy to reach (which likely means mostly mothers) (White, 2011). Partnerships that engage both mothers and fathers in their young children's education should lead to the strengthening of the significance of early childhood centres and the development of father-focused programs that further improve children's skills and experiences. Such a father-focused program could be part of a curriculum design for each centre; based on the *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) framework, each educational setting can design its own curriculum, which reflects and supports their own communities, family needs and aspiration. This is informed by two principles of Family and Community and Relationships from *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Such curriculum design can be interpreted as partnership programs that could create an environment which brings feeling valued and confidence to fathers to engage with early childhood centres. It is especially important to engage fathers in an educational setting that is likely to be dominated by female figures (Duncan & Te One, 2014; Raikes & Bellotti, 2006).

Despite the evidence that fathers' participation has the potential to lead to benefits for their children in early childhood education contexts, many early childhood education studies focus on parents; mothers and fathers, children and teachers (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006), and research on fathers alone is relatively scarce, particularly work that looks at ways of increasing and/or enhancing fathers' participation. According to research, father-teacher collaboration could be enhanced when fathers' sense of belonging is considered through their needs, behaviours and beliefs toward their children's education (Epstein, 2018; Tadi & Sadeghi, 2021). Additionally, research on emergent literacy emphasises the lack of father participation in parent-reading programs (Justice, 2006; Varghese & Wachen, 2015). These perspectives were used to develop a program that focuses on methods that fathers could use to increase their child's literacy skills. Research shows that fathers recognise their importance in their children's education (Tadi & Sadeghi, 2021; Wulansuci, 2020).

The current study is an attempt to investigate whether a father-focused program can firstly increase fathers' participation in early education and secondly, influence interactions between fathers and teachers positively. To this end, the father-focused program developed by Soleimani Tadi (2018) was utilised, which required fathers to perform shared reading activities with their children at the centre.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

This research examined the effectiveness of using a father-focused program within an early childhood centre. Among ten randomly selected centres within Christchurch, New Zealand that were invited to participate in the research, a total of four agreed (with approximately 30 children each). These centres were located in different parts of the city and represented a variety of socioeconomic neighbourhoods. Each centre was observed twice before and after the father-focused program to assess fathers' participation in the early childhood education environment.

### ***Study design and measure***

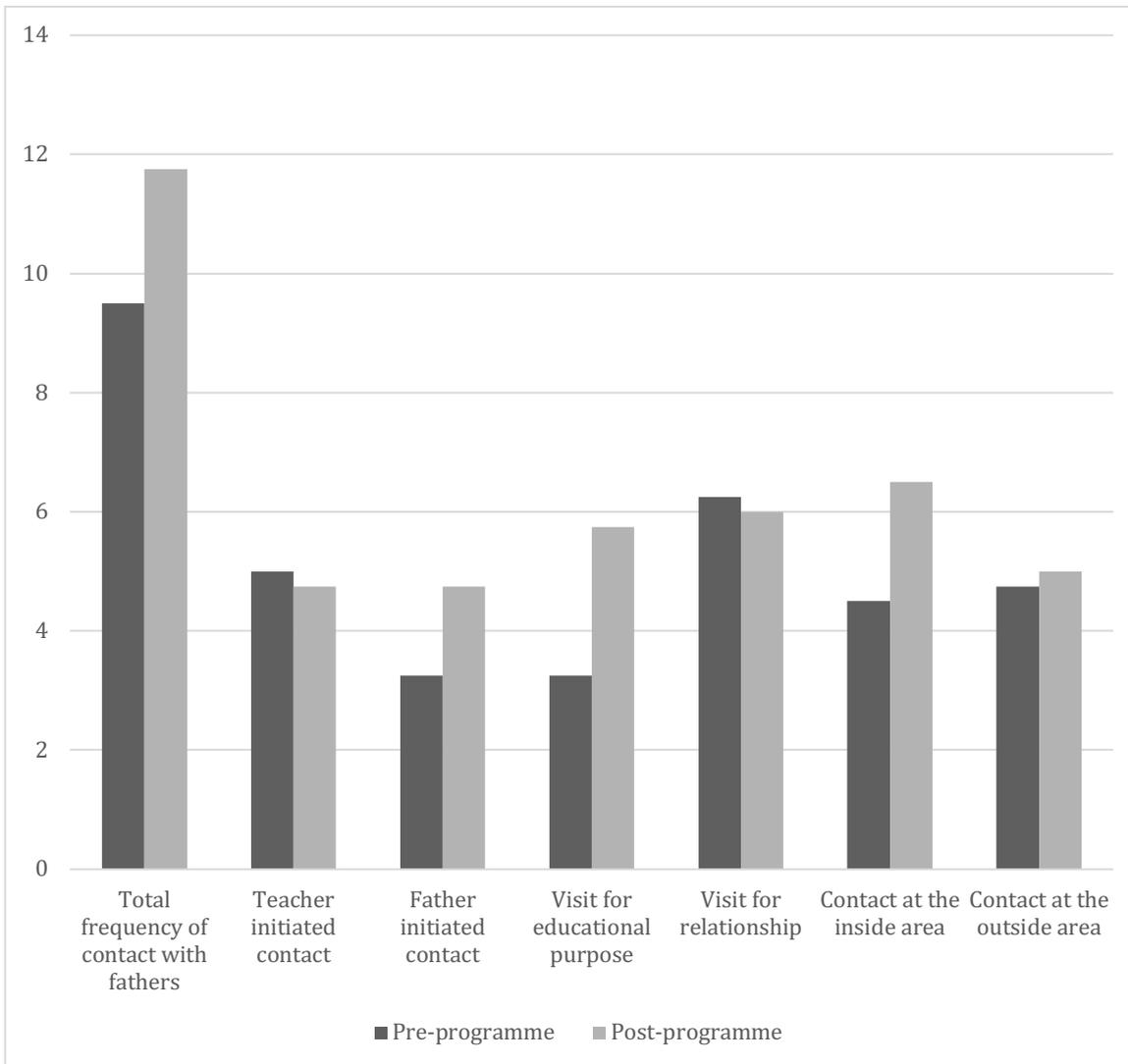
This research utilised a quantitative design using pre-observation/post-observation to examine the effectiveness of the father-focused program for fathers' participation in their children's early childhood centres. The research occurred over seven weeks, and the total number of fathers who engaged with the centre environment was recorded in two observation sessions, pre and post-program observations. Observations occurred two weeks prior (pre-program observation) to the father-focused program and two weeks after (post-program observation) to the father-focused program. Centres were observed over two mornings (at drop-off time) and over two afternoons (at pick-up time). Observations were completed during children's drop-off and pick-up time to track changes in father-teacher interactions.

Systematic observation of human behaviour in natural settings may lead to a description of the dynamic of the situation (Kahn, 2006). Hence, this study used observation sheets to record fathers' presence and interaction with early childhood centres. The recording observation sheet was adopted from previous studies that focused on the action/behaviours of targeted participants (Duncan et al., 2005; McBride et al., 2001). Items on the list were selected based on the aspects that involve the early childhood environment and activities, such as the place and purpose of father-teacher interactions. These items captured the quantity of fathers' presence in early childhood centres and also their interactions with teachers.

## **Results**

Observations focused on father-teacher interactions during drop-off and pick-up times at the centre. Data from the observation recording sheets were combined across the two pre-program observations and across the two post-program observations. Frequencies of fathers' presence and mean value were calculated for fathers seen in the centres, frequency of fathers' contacts with teachers/centres, who initiated contacts, purpose and place of contacts. Figure 1 presents an analysis of the recorded data from observations.

Figure 1 Comparison between Mean value of Pre & Post-Program Observations



Analyses of the observation data showed the difference between pre and post-program in all factors related to father-teacher interactions (see Figure 1). The mean value indicated an increase in the number of fathers interacting with centres in the post-program. When examining who initiated contacts pre and post-program, the results showed a slight decrease in interactions that were started by teachers in the post-program observations. In contrast, fathers during the post-program observation were found to initiate contacts more than during the pre-program observations. Considering the purpose and place of the contacts, the data indicated that a higher number of contacts for educational purposes occurred during the post-program observation. For example, a father initiated a conversation about his four-year-old son’s primary school visit. Another father asked the teacher if his child had been asked to read the book they read together in the centre’s shared reading. This also showed an increase in the frequency of contacts in the inside areas of the centres. All in all, analysis of the interactions between fathers and teachers indicated that the father-focused program efficiently involved fathers in children’s education and encouraged them to participate in early childhood centres.

## Discussion

Fathers are male role models whose participation in children's education is necessary and beneficial (Ma et al., 2016; McBride et al., 2017; McBride & Rane, 2018). The current research focused on developing fathers' partnerships with early childhood centres. Fathers, with their job commitments and social roles, are more likely to leave their children's learning to the early childhood centres and their teachers, who are perceived as experts. They may only interact with early childhood centres around picking-up and dropping-off times. While such interactions may be perceived very useful, this does not enhance father-teacher partnership emphasised in the research literature. It is important to note that more is needed to move beyond such interactions between parents and teachers. In other words, parents, in particular fathers, should feel that their presence in the early childhood centres is valued in their children's education (Lamb, 2000; Varghese & Wachen, 2015). Therefore, developing programs that encourage the effective participation of parents is useful.

To this end, a father-focused program was organised to fit with the fathers' schedule so that fathers could participate in the centre's environment at a time convenient to them. Based on this, fathers were asked to volunteer to be involved in shared reading activities with their children at the early childhood centre. The reading activities were selected based on the relevant literature (see Varghese & Wachen, 2015) to give most fathers a feeling of participating in something valuable in their children's education (for example, an improvement in their child's reading skills) since most of the shared reading activities are focused on mothers and even when a program is developed for parents, the number of participating mothers is usually higher (Justice, 2004, 2006).

The data reported in this research indicated that such a father-focused program does have the potential to change patterns of father-teacher interactions and to increase fathers' participation in early childhood centres. The findings also suggested changes in the types of interaction that fathers showed with early childhood teachers. The fact that such interactions with early childhood teachers occurred within the centre suggests that fathers may now better perceive the centre as a comfortable place to interact with their child's teacher. When interaction is valued by both teachers and parents, it is more likely to be increased and maintained. These interactions could be considered a positive change at the early childhood centre (Epstein, 2011). In addition, the changes in interactions with teachers brings to question how a program that targets communities and family needs could improve such fathers' participation. That highlighted the need to know fathers and understand fathers' perspectives in supporting a father-focused program.

In addition to changes in interactions with teachers, changes were also observed in fathers' behaviour during their interactions with their children. Specifically, fathers more frequently demonstrated behaviours that supported their children engaging in centre activities such as reading books and spending time with their children in book corners. Due to the nature and focus of the fathers' focus programme that was on literacy, the changes in the fathers' behaviour were mostly in the area of reading. These positive improvements are encouraging as they show that a relatively simple father-focused program with various focuses can lead to enhanced interactions from fathers. Although further research is necessary in examining the influence of father-teacher interaction on children's development and fathers' participation over time.

Of interest, there is a lack of any change in the teachers' willingness to initiate a conversation with fathers in the current research. This result is in line with another published study that indicated no differences existed in teachers' attitudes toward involving fathers after a two-year intervention program, which is in contrast with the expected outcome (McBride et al., 2001). One reason that may explain why the number of contacts initiated by teachers did not improve following the father-focused program is that the number of contacts initiated by fathers increased during the post-program observations. This could be interpreted that by increasing the number of contacts by fathers, teachers may not further attempt or decrease their effort to make connections with them, as teachers are communicating with them, and they might not be aware of who is initiating this conversation or the importance of their role as a teacher to communicate with fathers. This result needs further exploring by interviewing teachers and fathers after the post-program observation. These interviews might also introduce other factors that caused no changes in the total number of contacts between teachers and fathers between pre and post-program observations.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The current research examined the effectiveness of father-focused programs in the early childhood centre. Both early childhood centres and teachers need to design activities to engage parents in their children's education. Given that fathers reported that they are interested in participating in their children's education and also reported that they would like to talk about their children's education with early childhood teachers, father-focused programs can be considered a facilitator to improving fathers' participation in early childhood education. The results of the current research suggested that fathers need to have facilitating conditions and encouragement from teachers to take part in their children's early childhood centre. However, future research is required to confirm the father-teacher relationships identified in this research.

### **Limitations**

Similar to many research projects, the current one has its own limitations. Of interest, there is a lack of any change in teacher willingness to initiate conversations with fathers in the current research. As this study did not include teachers engagement with mothers, it is not clear whether the lack of engagement from teachers is specific to fathers. Further studies are required to compare teachers' willingness to initiate conversations with mothers and fathers.

Additionally, as children were enrolled in centre by the time of this study, teachers have had connections with most of the fathers. So, this may have impacted the teachers' efforts to have more interactions with fathers. Further studies with a larger sample size may be beneficial to determine the impact of teachers' efforts to initiate conversations with the fathers who they perceived as reluctant or new to the centre.

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