The Relationship Between Partnership with Families and Early Childhood Centres' Leadership on Children's Development and Learning

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Abstract

In line with the Saudi Vision 2030 under the 'vibrant society' key performance indicator, with increased demand for early childhood centres as families rely on them in developing their children's skills. This study aims to discover the role of leadership in enhancing partnership with families to develop children's skills and learning and development in general in early childhood centres in Saudi Arabia. It asks one main question: what role does the leadership of early childhood centres play in improving children's development and learning? To answer this question, it examines the extent to which the leadership of an early childhood centres can enhance children's development? Also, it examines the extent to which can fostering partnership with family's support improving children's development and learning. The study follows a qualitative method, employing a case study approach in an early childhood centre located in one of the main cities in the Western Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Semi-structured interviews intended observations and documentary analysis were used as data collection tools. Based on the evidence, four main themes emerged: communication between families and the centres, the environment of the centres, listening to families and being flexible, and finally taking good care of the staff. These factors appear to have a great impact on enhancing partnership with families, which consequently indicates improving children's development and learning. The recommendations shed that light on the importance of delegation, flexibility and inclusion of all stake holders. It also shows that regular meetings with parents can help. As for policymakers, it recommends that they should focus on practices more than they do on administrative work. In addition, they need to design protocols for parental engagement and involvement in children's care and learning.

Key words: Leadership, partnership with families, early childhood centres, Saudi Vision 2030.

Introduction

The first center for Early childhood education in Saudi Arabia was opened by the private sector back in 1965 (Alqassem et al, 2016) within a decade of that date, the ministry of education opened the first governmental kindergarten in 1975 (Alotaibi, 2021), the numbers of enrolled children and working teachers grew substantially since then. Nowadays, according to the General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT, 2025) the Early Childhood Development and Child Well-Being Statistics Publication for 2024 indicates that the rate of enrolment in an organized learning setting one year before formal primary education is 64.03%, which was 37.2% in 2017.

In the UNICEF report of the situation of early childhood in the MENA Region (UNICEF and ECDAN, 2024) it was stated that the lack of responsive caregiving in early years may result in profound and enduring effects on children's development. However, the evidence shows that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is already one of the leading countries in the region that prioritised early childhood care and education with both Arab Gulf Programme for Development (AGFUND) and the Arab Bureau Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) based and located in Saudi Arabia (ANECD, 2022), in addition to the local initiatives and projects (Alotaibi, 2021).

The Saudi Vision 2030 focuses on building a 'more liv[e]able and vibrant society' (Vision 2030, 2025), as societies are the foundation of economic prosperity of their countries, all members of the society must be involved in shaping that economy, including women. The Saudi government has been working towards empowering women in several sectors especially in the workforce arena, through providing supportive services, one of which focuses on supporting working mothers. According to the SAGAS (2024), in their latest labour market report, the Saudi workforce has witnessed an increase of Saudi females joining the workforce with a total

of 36.2% female workers when compared to the previous report of 2021, with this increase, there is a continues increased demand for more early childhood centres (Moe, 2025).

The term early childhood centres (ECC) in Saudi Arabia usually refers to children's hospitality centres, nurseries and kindergartens (MHRSD, n.d.). These centres welcome children from birth until ten years old. They are different from formal preschools, as they are not meant to be educational institutions, but rather to provide care services for children. So, since they are not expected to focus on teaching children any academic skills, by not being obligated to teach children gives the centres an advantage as they can be creative in the programmes they offer. Therefore, a number of these centres choose to focus on teaching children school readiness skills, in a playful child-centred way.

On another perspective, the human resources development fund also takes a role in supporting and empowering working mothers by providing financial support for childcare for eligible mothers HRDF (n.d.). One of the fund's initiatives is known as 'Qurrah' (pronounced: koo-rah) (meaning: something that brings happiness or contentment) which is, as they state:

[A] Program that supports the empowerment of working women, it is an initiative of the Human Resources Development Fund (Hadaf) within the national transformation programs. Saudi Arabia aims to join the labor market and continue in it while it is reassured about the care provided to its children by registering them in the licensed children hospitality service (ibid). By providing such service, the burden of paying for childcare for young children is partially waved from mothers. Nonetheless, it helped many families and provided opportunities for young children to get quality care services. HRDF (n.d.).

But why to focus on early years in specific? The Moe explains that when 'the basics of physical, social, emotional, and mental development for students and their simultaneous development in early childhood, between the ages of 3 and 8 years. This process depends at each stage on the abilities achieved by the child at the previous stage' (Moe, 2025). Therefore, to determine future success, one's should start from the early years. That is the reason behind developing policies and initiatives by the ministry 'to address the unique needs of young learners, raise performance levels, and create plans to build and institutionalize the child's entry and preparation for higher education stages' (ibid).

According to the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ; Squires and Bricker, 2009) which is a screening assessment of children for fine and gross motor control, problem solving, personality, and social behaviours, conducted by either parents or parents and caregivers, some children may underscore in one or more than one area of development, that might be the personality and social behaviour under which communication skills fall as well as children's ability to express their needs and desires. With experienced caregivers, even without applying the ASQ survey, a primary caregiver of a child might be able to compare the child's abilities to his/ her peers and spot any delays or fallouts, which was reported in this study by teachers.

There is an evident correlation between children's development and learning and partnership with families (CCCF, 2020; DfE, 2024; Koralek et al., 2019; UNLE, 2021). The significance of this research lies in examining the ways in which ECC leadership can foster partnership with families in ways that will have a positive impact of children's development and learning. As it presents evidence-based suggestions for practitioners and policy makers to implement as it could improve children's expressive language, their skills in communicating their needs, overall development and learning.

The study aims to discover the role of leadership in enhancing partnership with families to develop children's communication skills, and development in general in early childhood centres in Saudi Arabia. It asks one main question: what role does the leadership of early childhood centres play in improving children's development and learning? To answer this question, it examines the extent to which the leadership of an early childhood centres can enhance children's development? Also, it examines the extent to which can fostering partnership with families, support improving children's development and learning.

The terminologies used throughout this study are children's development and or overall development including the child's social and emotional development. While children's communication skills and expressive language,

which might be used interchangeably, refer to children's abilities to communicate their needs verbally (through the use of language, for example: saying yes, no, answering questions, or even saying this or not this) and nonverbally (through movement and/ or body gestures, for example: nodding or shaking their heads or screaming, the child points at something or holds something), which might be similar, in some ways, to what is meant by interpreting children's drawing as a mean of communication through art (Beltzung et al, 2023; Fabris et al, 2023).

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Literature review

Partnership with families

UNLE (2021) defines Partnership with families as:

Family-childcare partnerships emphasize relationships, complementary expertise, and joint responsibility for supporting children's development and learning. They also emphasize shared contributions, information, and goals. The relationship between children's primary caregivers—parents and early childhood educators—is a key driver of successful partnership. Parents and educators are better able to meet the needs of the child when they develop strong working relationships.

Partnership between families and schools is important, yet it becomes more important when discussing the care and wellbeing of young children (ibid). Several studies argued that having a professional, open, and two-way communication with families enhances children development and welfare (CCCF, 2020; DfE, 2024; Koralek et al., 2019). With a respected number of young children not living with both of their parents, but rather living and raised by a single parent, grandparents, or other legal guardians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) for various reasons, the term used is partnership with families and not partnership with parents.

This means there are different forms of families, however, wither it is a parent, a grandparent or any legal guardian of children, partnership with families includes different means of involvement and engagement. It includes aspects such as: communication, mutual respect between families and children's care providers, understanding, and shared responsibilities (DfE, 2024; Koralek et al., 2019; Ntekane, 2018; Sapungan et al., 2014), it does not, however, refer to role where parents or guardians of a child only inquire about the child's performance at school (Ntekane, 2018).

Implications of partnership with families

A review of the literature on parental engagement and family partnership with schools suggest that school age children tend to become active learners when there is a positive home-school relationship. This appears to have a significant impact on younger learners' achievements (Aldawsari, 2020; Goodall, 2018; Harris and Goodall, 2008; NCCA, n.d.; Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010). NCCA (n.d.: 8) divides the implications or benefits of families and care providers working together into three categories: benefits for families (mainly parents), benefits for care providers, and most importantly, benefits for children. The latter includes feeling of security which consequently affects the child's readiness to learn, confidence, enjoyment when there is a resemblance of their home environment at school, and connection. In addition, UNLE (2021) elaborates that 'through this partnership, both families (including parents, guardians, and primary caregivers) and educators can enhance children's development and address obstacles.

It is claimed that one of the major implications of partnerships with families is supporting learning and development, in all aspects of development, social, emotional as well as cognitive skills (NCCA, n.d; Ntekane, 2018; Sapungan et al., 2014; USDHHSACF, n.d.) Therefore, efforts should be made to raise family's awareness of the importance of their effective partnership with their children's schools/ care giving centres and educate them of the benefits they and their children will benefit from (Koralek et al., 2019).

Challenges of creating partnership with families

Low economic status of families, fear, language barriers, and time have been identified as challenges in creating partnership with families. Along the side with school leadership weakness creating opportunities for partnership and failure in promoting it, which could result in poor outcomes for the children (NCCA, n.d.; Ntekane, 2018 and Sapungan et al.), or even other exceptional challenges such as is the case of war or extreme poverty (Nabhani, 2012). None the less, Zhan (2006) argues that parental involvement, regardless of factors such as income and parents' characteristics, corelates positively in children's educational performance, particularly in math and reading.

Organisations and local authorities, thus, are offering new strategies and suggesting them to help families and school leaders find a common ground to establish their partnership. Examples of these initiatives include conducting house visits, meeting the community, reaching out to families through traditional channels such as flyers and announcements. Effort should be made from the two sides as the primary beneficiary is the child, which is the core of both of their concerns. (CCCF, 2020; Meaningful Beginnings, 2024; UNLE, 2021).

Effective leadership, collegial leadership, delegation and agency

Research has shown that effective school leadership is not to be measured by a single factor, nor it is to be a one procedure apply to all. As the nature of schools' dynamics, contexts and environments affect how leadership is practiced and perceived. Accordingly, how it impacts teachers, students and other staff members (Alqahtani et al., 2021; Day et al., 2001; Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Miller, 2018; Morrison, 2010).

Collegial models of leadership tend to engage other than leaders in the hierarchy in the decision-making process (Bush, 2011; Harris, 2003), so more staff members are involved in the enactment of leadership. To extend staff member's agency, a leader may practice delegation, which is referred to as the act when a leader transfer one of his/ her tasks to a subordinate (Bush, 2011; Coleman and Glover, 2010). Practicing delegation and extending staff agency does not necessarily mean extending their accountability. Although some may argue that delegation is to be linked with accountability (Hammersley-Fletcher and Brundrett, 2008) however, Bush (2008: 27) argues that 'accountability pressures' usually come from governments, parents and the wider public'.

Methodology and methods

Research aims and questions

The study aims to discover the role of leadership in enhancing partnership with families to develop children's development and learning in early childhood centres (ECC). By examining the role played by early childhood centres' leadership in resolving issues with children's development and communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal). The research asks two questions:

1. How can early childhood centres' leadership positively enhance children's development and learning?
2. How can fostering partnership with family's support improving children's development and learning?

Research methodology, approach and methods

This is a qualitative study (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2020; Hammersley and Campbell, 2012; Morrison, 2012) adapting a case study approach (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Hammersley et al., 2000; Stake, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Three research methods are used in collecting the data: semi-structured interview, intended observations and documentary analysis.

Sampling

Purposive sampling (BRM, n.d.; Palinkas et al., 2015) is used in choosing the case study centre and the participants. The centre was selected based on its type and geographical location, while the participants were selected based on their positions and the nature of their work and its relationship to the research questions (BRM, n.d.; Etikan et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2002). The case study is a small, private early childhood centre, that corresponds to The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, it is in one of the major cities in the Western region of the Kingdome of Saudi Arabia. It is considered a small centre as it has only 3 classrooms with 4 management team, 4 teachers and 8 teacher assistants.

Research instrument design, and data collection

Individual interviews were the primary source for data collection, which was second by intended, targeted observations and documentary analysis (Creswell,2020; Davidson, 2009; Maxwell, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Newby, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews

Three interviews with a 70mins average/ interviews with three participants were conducted at the centre, where voice recording was used, and details of participants body language were documented. Table-1 below shows information about the participants, and Table-2 shows the interview questions.

Table 1: participants information

Participants	Position	Academic qualification	Years of experience
1st	CEO - AKA: (Administrative Headteacher)	Bachelor's degree in a business major (not educational)	1-5 years
2nd	Academic Headteacher	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	10+ years
3rd	Administrative assistant	Bachelor's degree in a scientific major (not educational)	5-10 years

Table 2: semi-structured interview questions

Category	Question
Personal information	What is you name? academic qualification? current position? And years of experience?
Employment history	Where did you work before? (location, positions, and duration) leading to working in this centre
Hierarchy (Direct leaders and followers)	Who do you report to? Who reports to you? Who evaluates you? Who do you evaluate? Do you have direct contact with parents? Why? Why not? And if yes, elaborate.
Nature of work	Describe/ walk me through a day in your life in the centre from the moment you entre in the morning until you leave in the afternoon/ evening.
Interactions with parents	Give me an example of interaction with parents (as many as you wish). (written or nonwritten) (in person or online)
	Who answers parents' calls and What's up messages?
	What is the result/ effect of having a different person answering to parents' messages or calls on the relationship between parents and the centre?
	Give me an example of a weird/ strange interaction with parents. How does it affect children's communication and development?
	Give me an example of a happy interaction with parents. How does it affect children's communication and development?
	Give me an example of an embarrassing interaction with parents. How does it affect children's communication and development?
	What are the consent forms you collect from parents upon registering their children? Show me samples if possible.
	How do you handle/ manage/ deal with parents' complaints? How does it affect children's communication and development?
	Show me examples of written communication between you and parents (initiated from you and responded to by you)
	How do you handle communication with parents if they are separated/ divorced?
	Do you have guardians of children other than their parents? How do you manage communication with them?
	Have you ever had a difficult situation with parents/ carers? Elaborate please
Written communication with parents	What is the language in which you communicate with parents in writing? What is the time you normally text parents at? Why do you write to parents? Do you have any regular written communication such as newsletters or messages? What is the impact of all of these practices observed on children?
Impact on children	Impact of parents' trust/ open communication channels between the family and the centre on children's development and learning
	In your opinion, how does the environment affect children's communication and development?
Open ended	Additional information the participant would like to share

Observations

Non-participant intended, targeted observations were conducted where the researcher observed parents' interactions with different centre's staff members, at random times during the day, in addition to attending a parent-teacher meeting with no interference. A total of 150mins of observations, the details of the location, duration and who was involved were documented, along with the language used (verbal and non-verbal), voice recording was used when possible. Table-3 below shows examples of logged observations with details.

Table 3: observation log

Examples	Details
1. Mother with CEO	The CEO was smiling, facing the mom with her whole body during their conversation, nodding her head as the mother was speaking. They were standing in one side of the corridor away from the crowd.
2. Mother with Academic Headteacher	The headteacher was holding the mother gently from her arm, while lowering her head to get as close as possible to the mother as the latter seemed to whisper something into the headteacher's ear. She looked attentive the whole time.
3. Administrative assistant standing at the entrance of the centre	As mothers were entering the centre for the parent-teacher meeting, the administrative assistant was at the entrance greeting everyone with a welcoming smile on her face, and open arms showing hospitability and guiding them towards the meeting room. She walked everyone and entered the room with them, showing them to the coffee and beverages table and the light snacks. Pointed to them that they can hand their Abaya (body covers) in the provided hanging rack.
4. The meeting room	Spacious room with partial sunlight. The chairs are arranged in a half-circle shape facing a wall where the centre's staff have placed a small set of shelves containing materials and examples of tools used by teachers to showcase and demonstrate the activities they apply with the children. Coffee tables and side tables are provided for parents' convince, with tissue papers and card game that was used as an ice breaker at the beginning of the meeting.
5. The centre on the parent-teacher meeting day	Children were kept in their classrooms, so the meeting doesn't get disturbed. Some assistants were available to help with the children (standing outside the room). A helper was present just outside the meeting room and took turns offering mothers drinks and snacks. The whole centre smelled nicely and they used Arabic scented charcoal (Bukour) before the meeting.

Documentary analysis

Samples of weekly and periodical letters sent by the centre to parent were analysed, in addition to WhatsApp messages exchanged between parents and the centre.

Consent and anonymity

Consent forms were signed by all interview participants, and the centre's leadership obtained consent from parents whose messages were analysed, or their interactions were observed.

Credibility, validity, triangulation and data analysis

A multi-methods approach is adopted in collecting the data to ensure validity, reliability and relatability of the data. Triangulation usually refers to one of the strategies used to increase the credibility of the research study through raising the validity and reliability of the findings, especially in qualitative studies, which normally has limitations, as it cross-verify and reinforce the data (Asogwa et al, 2023; Silverman, 2006). Ediyanto et al. (2025) argues that there are different types of triangulations: varying between methodological triangulation, data triangulation, theory triangulation and researcher (or investigator) triangulation (ibid: 168).

Accordingly in this research, triangulation was conducted at two aspects: the research instruments or data collection methods (by employing interviews, observations and documentary analysis), and within the interviews, the interview participants were at different leadership levels (headteachers and assistants). In addition to that, as the data was collected in Arabic language and then translated by the researcher to English, which may present some challenges for researchers (Temple and Young, 2004), so, in order to ensure its validity respondent triangulation was applied at different stages of the data analysis. The researcher shared transcripts of the interviews and notes from the observations with the participants to ensure its validity (Creswell, 2020; Davidson, 2009; Hammersley and Campbell, 2012; Silverman, 2006).

Data analysis

It is rather important to emphasized that, and according to the nature of the case study approach, this study does not intend for generalisation from the findings nor for drawing conclusions, however the purpose of this research is to identify the possible ways that leadership can foster partnership with the family in order to improve children's skills, and to look for explanations that prove the extent of the relatability of the findings to other similar contexts. Thus, the collected data was analysed based on emerging themes (Creswell, 2020; Davidson, 2009) following these steps as data analysis procedures:

1. Establishing a coding frame
2. Transcribing the recordings
3. Combining data from different research tools/ cross examining data from different participants
4. Establishing emerging themes

Discussion and findings

Communication

The data shows that partnership with families can take different forms: firstly, communication ways (written and verbal), secondly, conducting meetings (in-person or online), and thirdly and most importantly, respect of parents and how respect is communicated to parents through all means of communication seem to matter a lot.

Regarding written communication, participant 1 comments that when replying to mothers' WhatsApp messages she thinks of herself when texting and how she feels respected (or not) from the way she receives a response, she says:

'I honestly [when replying to mothers] aspire to [reply] as I like to be replied to, and this is the way I seek when responding to mothers' messages'

When the participants were asked about what times or for what reason do they contact the family during the day, participant 3 says:

'if a teacher notices that a child has no lunchbox [from the moment they enter the classroom] she informs her colleague [the floor admin] who informs me, to contact the family [so the child can have the lunchbox delivered

before the break] but when that happens we found that in most cases the child comes after having breakfast at home… we offer snacks.. mostly apples or bananas.

Written communication as a way of parents' inclusion in the decision-making and planning for children's learning, as one of the centres foster partnership with families is via involving them in their plans and up-coming events. For example, participant 2 shared with parents, during the parent-teacher meeting that during the coming months they will be applying a new strategy in teaching children some Islamic concepts. She elaborates:

'In addition to the applied methods, we will be adding two more approaches, every month we will choose one of Allah's [God's] names and introduce it to children'.

Keeping record of written communication with parents at the beginning of the registration process is as important as staying in touch with them during the time the child is registered with the centre. Participant 3 in the study explains that as part of their application procedure, parents are required to fill-in a registration form, in which they ask specific questions about the family including, number of family members, where does the child live, who lives with the child on daily basis, and if parents are living together or if they are separated (they could be living in the same house by they are not together) or even if they are divorced. She explains:

'in the form we ask if parents live together, because it affects the child'.

At the end of the parent-teacher meeting one mother complimented the centre's leadership team for how appreciated she feels by the way they welcome her feedback, every time, participant 2 replies to the complement saying:

'These words are our fuel'. Then another mother adds that she truly thanks them for replying to every single message she sends, and that she likes to thank them for all they do with true devotion and dedication. Figure 1 below shows the emerging themes related to communication with parents, it was not however intended to rate the redundancy of each emerging theme as a mean to measure its importance when communicating with parents, thus the values are distributed evenly.
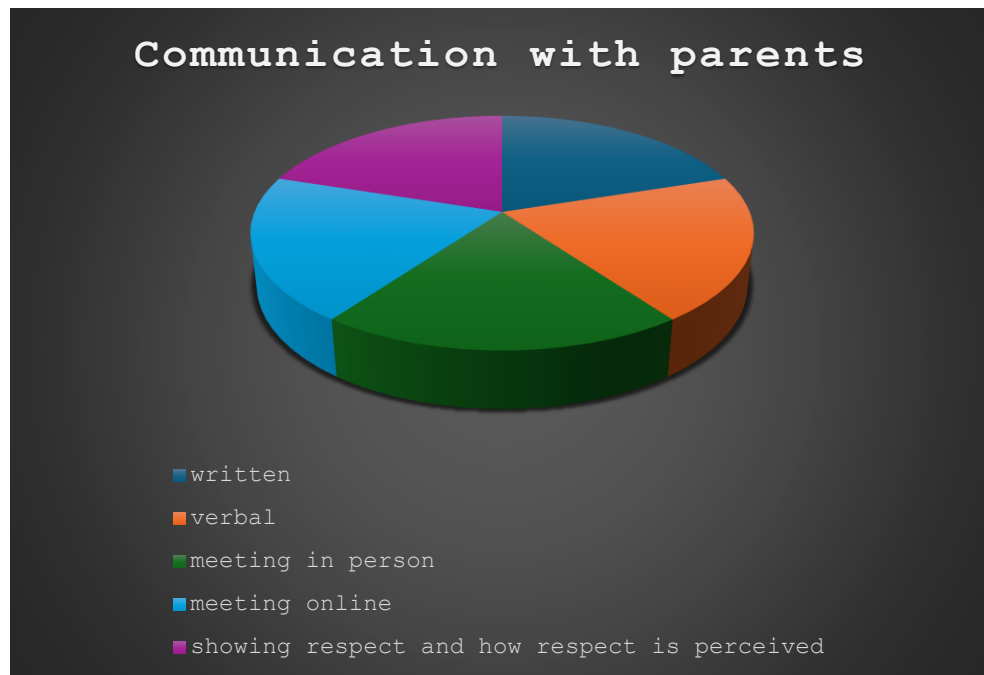

Figure 1: emerging themes related to communication with parents

Home-like environment

Parents appear to appreciate the time and effort that was spent in creating the centre's current environment, both physical and non-physical aspects of the environment, as many of parents have describe it as a 'home-like environment', which NCCA (n.d.) claims to be significant aspects in building partnership with families. The observation notes indicate parents' satisfaction when picking up their children (especially younger ones) from their classroom, which is allocated on the ground floor.

The observations also acknowledged staff members facial expressions when meeting and greeting parents and children both upon arrival and when leaving the centre, which was described as smiling, welcoming happy faces. Similarly, participant 3 recalls a new mother's feedback on how her and her child's experience with the centre after a while is:

'I feel like I have taken my child to my parents' house, I don't feel like I have taken him to a school [centre], I can't even begin to compare between this school [centre] and his previous one, the two places are completely different'.

In addition, participant 2 expresses how much she appreciates parents' feedback and comments (even the most random and spontaneous ones) stating:

'the families always overwhelm us with their kindness, honestly when we came to start our business in childcare sector, some people warned us from parents and how challenging they could be [when it comes to meeting their expectations], what I can say about families is that [they] always fill us with gratitude and love, by their simplest acts, one day a mom got us breakfast that she baked and prepared herself'.

Evidence in the literature suggests, the feeling that parents' sensed about the non-physical environment of the centre comes from the small practices of the staff members, which are encouraged and modelled by the centre's leadership. Participant 2 explains that as part of her daily routine, her first act of the day as a headteacher is taking rounds and visiting the classrooms, spending some time in each class, talking to children and listening to their stories, if they care to share one. She elaborates:

'I like to say good morning to the children (and my staff), if someone has a story, or needs a hug, I always like to spend the first hour of my day around the classrooms [and the children]'.

Figure 2 below showcases aspects of the environment, physical and non-physical with emphasis on the non-physical parts as reported from the data.
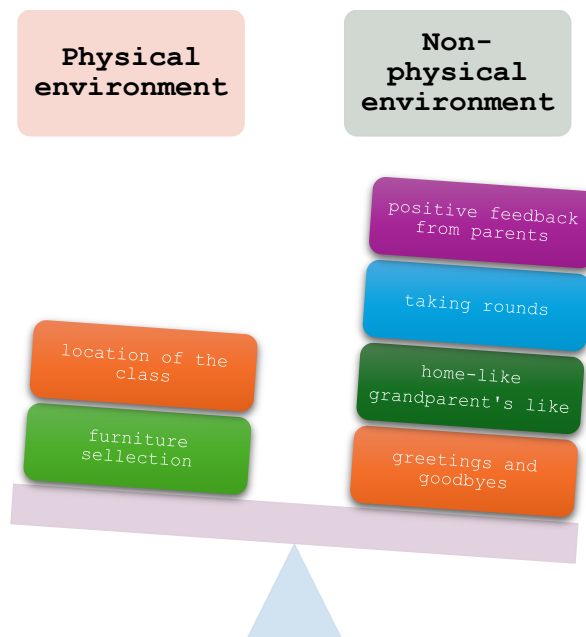

Figure 2: aspects of the environment, physical and non-physical

Implications of partnership with families

It is indicated that partnership and open, two-ways communication between families and the centre appear to be an essential part of parental engagement and involvement. The participants discuss that either by keeping open channels of communication or having a strongly implemented rule about how and when to replay to parents' messages have resulted in better outcomes when it comes to parental engagement with them. The participants discuss that some parents appreciated the responses they received, the carefully chosen words and terminologies used in the verbal and written instant messages.

Partnership with families is not only valued by parents; but also, centre's leaders appreciate it as it helps in resolving issues and reduces the chances of unpleasant incidents from reoccurring. Participant 3 gives an example of when a child used to hit his/ her friends and things escalated until another parent called and asked to have his daughter withdraw from the centre because of the child who hits other children. To resolve the issue, the headteacher had to contact the family and had a formal meeting with parents of the hitting child, they unfortunately were not very respondent at the time and did not respond well to the teacher's call for collaborating to work out a plan to resolve the root cause of the issue. Therefore, with no action nor reaction from the family, the headteacher recontacted the parents and informed them of the centre's decision of not accepting to extend the child's enrolment at the centre.

Another example of how a two-way communication is the key to parental involvement, yet this does not necessarily mean that centres are obligated to abide by all the requests and suggestions received from parents. It rather presents an opportunity for teachers and leaders to educate parents about child caring tips and techniques or developmental needs, or any other emerging themes as they see fit. Participant 2 discusses that a parent when first visited them was asking about their homework policy, she elaborates:

'We don't teach children how to write… we focus on reading and writing readiness skills, if you [addressing the mother] are looking for a place where children learn to write and have homework [when they are four or five years old] this not the place for you'.

She explains that they found out, by stating from the beginning what services they offer and what services they do not offer, this practice turned out to be an effective way to establish partnership with families. Which appeared to be appreciated by parents as they often express that not only their children been taking care for, but that parents feel that they have been taking care for, too.

Figure 3 demonstrates that as an implication of partnership with families, parents need to understand that it is an open yet two-way communication channel. So as parents might demand the centre to listen to their requests, they are obligated to cooperate and collaborate with the centre to achieve better outcomes for their children's learning and all over development and welfare.
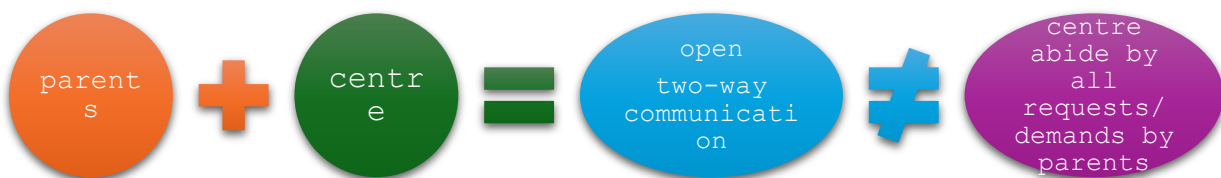
Figure 3: Implications of partnership with families

Leadership and staff members

It was a surprising finding that there is a relationship between staff members and their leadership team which seem to affect partnership with families. The data reveals that the level of satisfaction from the staff members on their leadership team has an impact on partnership with families and the degree of families' engagement with the centre. Participant 2 discusses that as part of her role; she attends classes and evaluates all teachers and care givers in the centre. Her evaluation focuses on their educational practices, manners and the ways in which they interact with children. She noted that partnership with families appear to corelates with high evaluation of the practitioner wither it was a teacher or an assistant.

Moreover, participant 1 speaks highly of her assistants and how they tend to be proactive and take the initiative of learning from their mistakes and how they tend to copy her actions, especially when interacting with parents. She elaborates:

'Honestly my assistant is a fast learner and she aspires to achieve... I believe that to get better in communication she should make mistakes, and I will accept them'. In addition, she adds: 'I delegate and expect mistakes... it has been a long journey, and I can recall several incidents but what I always do is observe. I observe how my assistants interact with parents and then ask them to observe me and then we set and discuss the situations... now we are at the stage where parents mistaken my assistant for me [they think I am replying to their massages while she is the one taking care of it]'.

As it appears, effective leadership at schools is unique considering the unique nature of school contexts with all the factors which may have an impact on the practice and implementation of leadership, including culture, challenges and community, as argue Day et al., (2001) and Hallinger, (2018). Thus, the supportive and caring environment created by the centre's leadership, and perceived by their staff members, reflects a effective leadership practices, as it resulted in happy, satisfied and committed members of staff. Participant 2 explains how she treats all of her colleagues as family members saying:

'upon entering [the building], I hang my Abaya [meaning: cover, pronounced: ah-bah-yah], then I go check on all my teachers, say good morning, it makes a difference to me what they communicate to me non-verbally, I can sense who is sleepy, who came in a good mood... sometimes I spread hugs'.

This reflects the argument by Thomson and Holloway (1997) were they highlight the importance of support and acceptance when showed by their leadership, and the impact of that on teachers and on their performance, as Alqahtani et al., (2021) claims, school leadership impacts both, teachers' students' performances.

Findings

The discussion reveals that:

• The physical and non-physical environment of the early childhood centre have an impact on children's developmental skills, especially on how it affects the child's feeling of safety and security. The more home-like an environment is, the more likely it is for the child to express and communicate his/her needs. The home-like environment means all aspects of the space, from the physical arrangement of the furniture, the allocation of the classrooms based on children's age, and how close it is from other facilities including, toilets, outdoor playground and dining area. The non-physical is linked more to the language used when talking and addressing children, the body language of the teachers and all staff members interacting with children, which supports the non-verbal communication and expressing understanding and sympathising with children.

• When leadership team practice delegation with staff members, especially with fresh graduates and those with minimum years of experience, this practice appears to help in promoting self-esteem in the staff and reflects the level of trust between the leadership and their staff members.

• Having committed leaders who are keen to provide support when needed and offer learning opportunities for their staff members when possible. Also guide their staff towards the best practices in the field, reflects on more effective partnerships with families and better involvement from them, which at the end results in good

communication between the family and the centre, the thing that positively impacted children's development in different areas one of which is their communication skills.

- Flexibility in dealing with families is key to a successful partnership with them. Early childhood centres which correspond to The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development appear to have an advantage if compared to those corresponding to The Ministry of Education, and they shall benefit from it especially in their policies and procedures that tend to affect parental involvement and engagement with the centres, as it will increase their level of partnership, agency and satisfaction.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the evidence, when the early childhood centre's physical and non-physical environment is similar to that of a child's home, or any other relative environments (such as the grandparents homes) it helps improve children's development and communication skills as it enhances children's confidence, increases the child's enjoyment levels and fosters the child's readiness to learning and developing, as discussed by NCCA (n.d.).

In addition, when the centre's workers are as caring and as considerate as parents, the children show improved expressive language. Parental engagement with early childhood centres appears to have an impact on children's development and learning, it is therefore, recommended to enhance parental involvement and promoted for stronger collaboration between centres' leadership and parents. Similarly, Kambouri et al. (2022) emphasizes that effective partnership is created by the leadership as it can create shared goals with parents to facilitate children's development through regular communication channels and the involvement of parents in the decision-making processes (Bush, 2011; Harris, 2003). Yet it is a two-way communication, as this research shows that even though parents appreciated the centre's flexibility in the way they responded to their needs, the centre's leadership in return was asking for understanding and cooperation with the centre and the workers to help the children reach their optimal developmental goals. (DfE, 2024).

Recommendations

Policy

- The implications of parental engagement and involvement on children's development are significant and shall not be ignored, therefore policy makers can set a minimum measure for parental engagement and involvement which parents are obligated to abide by.
- Local authorities' role can be beneficial for both, centres' leadership and parents, if it becomes more focused on the practices and less administrative.

Practice

- Include all stakeholders and relevant parties in planning the internal environment for early childhood centres, to reach an environment that mimics the welcoming home environment, of course with considerations of local measures and international quality standards for childcare centres.
- Encourage early childhood centres' leaderships to practice delegation and empower all their staff members by offering them more agency. Also work towards developing individualised career plans that allow all members of staff to evolve, whilst equipping them with team worker skills, and building their self-esteem and trust to have them ready to get promoted into a higher level in the leadership hierarchy as well as to improve their level of service which they provide to young children.
- Hold regular meetings with the staff, and continues, consistent monitoring of their performance by the centres' leadership.

- Ensure offering opportunities for all staff members to attend career development workshops in various aspects including communication skills, improving body language skills and emotional intelligence.
- Centres' leadership can embrace flexibility and be flexible when revising centre's polices and regulations especially those related to parents' communication, involvement and engagement.
- Childcare centres physical environment should mimic that of a child's home environment.
- Keep open and instant communication channels with parents either through communication apps such a s WhatsApp, or others.

Hold daily chats with parents and primary care givers of children.

- Open commination with families gives them the opportunity to share their backgrounds, hopes for their children, as well as their fears and concerns, leadership of early childhood centres should value that and use it to better support the children.
- Take into consideration parents' suggestions and recommendations and include them in the process of decision making about the various aspects of their children's learning, education and care.

Research

- As case studies might be helpful in investigating a phenomenon, they however may present some empirical limitations, therefore researchers can overcome these limitations by modifying the research methods, tools and variables. Research studies can focus on larger early childhood centres, with more children, classrooms, teachers and staff members. It can examine different leadership and hierarchical structures to better understand the relationship between children's skills' development and the role played by parental involvement. Various means of parental involvement can be studied, as it is not enough to investigate the ways to support and encourage parental involvement, but the challenges leadership can face in the process shall be identified too.

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دور القيادة في تعزيز الشراكة مع الأسرة لتنمية مهارات التواصل لدى الأطفال في مراكز الطفولة المبكرة

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المستخلص

تماشيا مع رؤية المملكة ٢٠٣٠ وتحت محور "المجتمع الحيوي"، الذي يهتم ويركز على توفير نظامي صحة ورعاية مجتمعية (Vision 2030, 2025) أصبح من الضروري توفير الخدمات المساندة التي تهتم بدعم المرأة لتساهم بفاعلية في بناء الاقتصاد في المملكة. وعليه، فإن التزايد ملحوظ في الطلب على الحضانات ومراكز الطفولة المبكرة حيث إن الأسر تتجه إلى الاعتماد على هذه المراكز في تعليم أطفالهم المهارات المختلفة ومتابعة نموهم وتطورهم في مختلف الجوانب النمائية، بما في ذلك تنمية مهارات التواصل لدى الأطفال الصغار. لذا تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة الدور الذي تلعبه قيادة الحضانات ومراكز الطفولة المبكرة في تعزيز الشراكة مع الأسر، وذلك بهدف تطوير مهارات التواصل لدى الأطفال الملتحقين بالمراكز تلك. والسؤال الرئيس الذي تطرحه الدراسة هو: ما هو دور القيادة في مراكز الطفولة المبكرة في تحسين مهرات التواصل لدى الأطفال الصغار؟ وللإجابة على هذا التساؤل تقوم الباحثة بالنظر إلى أي مدى يمكن لقيادة المراكز التأثير الإيجابي على تطوير مهارات التواصل لدى الأطفال؟ إضافة إلى أي مدى يمكن لتعزيز الشراكة مع الأسر التأثير الإيجابي على تطوير مهارات التواصل لدى الأطفال؟ تتبع الدراسة المنهج النوعي، وتوظف طريقة دراسة الحالة لأحد مراكز الطفولة المبكرة والتي تقوم بتقديم الرعاية للأطفال من عمر سنتين وحتى ستة سنوات. تقع هذه الحضانة في أحد المدن الرئيسية في المنطقة الغربية من المملكة العربية السعودية. وتوظف الدراسة كلا من المقابلات الشخصية الشبه مقننة، الملاحظات القصدية، وتحليل الوثائق والبيانات كأدوات لجمع البيانات ظهرت من الأدلة أربع موضوعات رئيسية وهي: التواصل بين الأسر والمركز، البيئة الحسية للمركز، المرونة، وأخيرًا العناية والاهتمام بالموظفات والعاملات بالمركز. اتضح من ذلك، أن لهذه العوامل الأربعة الأثر الكبير على تعزيز الشراكة بين الأسر ومراكز الطفولة المبكرة، مما يؤثر بدوره على تحسين فرص تعلم الأطفال وتطوير مهاراتهم في التواصل والتعبير عن احتياجاتهم. توصي الدراسة بأهمية تفعيل بعض الممارسات الإدارية كالتفويض والمرونة وإشراك جميع أصحاب المصلحة في القرارات. كما توصي بضرورة عقد اجتماعات دورية مع أولياء الأمور. وبالنسبة لصنّاع القرار والمشرفين فإن الدراسة توصي بالتركيز على الممارسات أكثر من التركيز على المتابعة الإدارية للمراكز تحت إشرافهم، كما تسلط الضوء على أهمية تصميم الإجراءات والقواعد التنظيمية والسياسات المرجعية لتفعيل الشراكة مع الأسر لدعم مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم ورعاية أطفالهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القيادة، الشراكة مع الأسر، مراكز الطفولة المبكرة، رؤية السعودية ٢٠٣٠.