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How to involve families in the educational learning process. Practical examples from preschool multicultural environments.

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Abstract

There is a growing need to involve families in the educational learning processes. Research reveals that the most effective educational programs for preschool children are those that involve parents in their learning processes (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Bryan & Henry, 2012). This article focuses on practices utilized in preschool settings to enhance the involvement and support of families by taking into account children's overall development and learning within a multicultural background (McWayne, Melzi, & Mistry, 2022). Classroom examples are presented that extend to the children's home environment along with tools and practices used to actively involve the family in the learning process. The aim is for children and adult experiences to be presented and used in a context where these experiences are valued. The first two practical examples concern the creation of a *digital newspaper* by children and educators and *the digital classroom* co-created by educators, parents, and children utilizing multimodal forms of communication. The third involves parental participation in a *radio project*, where the focus is on transferring socio-cultural elements from home to school and vice versa whilst highlighting the musical culture and experiences of all participants. It is believed that the tools and practices that were utilized in this paper could inform practice and address the difficulties that foreign and native families may have by encouraging their active participation in the learning process. The aim is for children and adult experiences to be presented and used in a context where these experiences are valued as the UN focuses on the sustainable development goals of "leaving no one behind" (UN, 2016) via the recognition of the development of the society



through inclusivity (von Heimburg, Langås, & Ytterhus, 2021). Classroom examples that extend to the children's home environment in addition to tools and practices used to actively involve the family in the learning process. Based on Gregoriadis et al. (2023) in recent years literature views family as 'a whole-family learning environment' and points out how practices that are carried out at home enable children's learning and development.

Keywords: home school partnership, multicultural environments, preschool education

Introduction

There is a growing recognition of engaging parents, families, and communities in raising the educational attainment of young children (DEECD, 2008). A wealth of research evidence highlights that parental engagement in schooling positively influences children's achievement and attainment (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Parental involvement is not only referred to as informing parents about children's development but also involving parents in the actual educational process (Hill, 2022). Homeschool partnership is viewed as of utmost importance during early childhood education since during this period young children are becoming adjusted to a learning environment that is new to them (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The social support theory by Cohen & Wills (1985), suggests that parental involvement in a partnership between home and school can be viewed as crucial in helping children cope with stress related to learning, whilst home-school partnership may prove to be a significant element for their adjustment. It is also evident that the more similar young children's experiences are between their home and school environment the easier it is for children to attain that knowledge (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Research also emphasizes that children's self-esteem grows as they are involved in common learning experiences between school and home (Edwards, Fler & Nuttall, 2008) as this cooperation makes them feel safe (Coie & Dodge, 1998) and encourages children to switch between home and school language. Children of various cultural origins should be encouraged and supported in translanguaging within the educational process to ensure that their needs are met and their perspectives are heard (Papadopoulos and Jansen, 2024).

For many different school systems, the issue of engaging parents in schooling is a shared aspiration and goal, however, it also brings many challenges. Parents are an important standpoint as far as children are concerned in their educational path and this relationship must be continued and strengthened when they enter formal and non-formal education (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). It is evident that there are various ways that parental involvement in young children's education is presented in the literature. Nzuruba (2024) in an attempt to present these has outlined Epstein's framework that 'was initially divided into four categories of PI: fundamental responsibilities, school-centered engagement, home-based participation, and involvement in student decision-making. Subsequently, it was then categorized into six discernible types, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community' (p. 155). For Deslandes (2019) to cooperate means to participate in the fulfillment of a task or to claim responsibility and partnership is a participatory relationship between two parties and parental involvement is a way of establishing it. He believes that true cooperation is based on mutual trust, shared goals, and shared communication (Deslandes, 2019).

An effective home-school collaboration results in faster progress in child development, long-term academic success, positive attitude and behavior of the child toward learning, more successful training programs, and therefore more efficient kindergartens (Alevriadou, Vryniotis, Kyridis, Sivropoulou-Theodosiadou, & Chrysafidis, 2008). But such cooperation is not always feasible as certain limitations and difficulties apply. Educators, on the one hand, might fear having their profession discredited, fear of having their pedagogical value/authority questioned, and lack of collaboration management knowledge (Georgiou, 2000; Roffey, 2012). Parents on the other might have negative past experiences, might be

possessed by feelings of insecurity, have fear of failure, of stigmatizing their child, might feel controlled by the teacher and finally might develop feelings of guilt (Pantazis, 1997). In this view, educators should provide motivation for involvement between the children's home and the school, in general, examples of such practices are presented below.

In and Out of Classroom Practices

Taking into consideration the limitations and difficulties mentioned previously and the fact that it is often the case that educators are afraid that a third party entering the classroom, especially family members of the children in their class, will create havoc and will lead to young children's attachment to their significant adult, we will present several practical examples of effective home-school partnership. These practices were geared towards what Birbili (2011) denoted that educators should take into account in the organization of learning and teaching the knowledge and skills that children have acquired within the sociocultural context of their family, to awaken parents to the learning opportunities that are present in the home and family environment and to give parents concrete ideas for activities and strategies to support what children are learning at school. Papadopoulos (2024) also supports that 'it is essential to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages dialogue. Educators have the ability to create an environment in their classroom that prioritizes and encourages communication by organizing the physical layout to foster teamwork. As an illustration, it is possible to establish compact zones for group discussions' (p. 34). Finally, the use of ICT was of importance in the examples presented, since according to the literature it has been observed to have a positive effect on the understanding of the educational project, increasing the quality and duration of their participation (Simon & Dan, 2017; Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2004; Esimone & Ojukwu, 2014).

The use of ICT in pre-school settings aims to enhance children's learning experiences as well as enable educators to communicate effectively with children and their significant adults. For the purposes of this practice-focused article, selected examples are given in order to highlight the practices that can support in creating a cooperative culture of learning between school and home. The examples that are presented below were selected because they provide evidence of contemporary practices linked to early education and were carried out during a whole school year.

A digital newspaper

Parent: How was your day at school?

Student: Good...

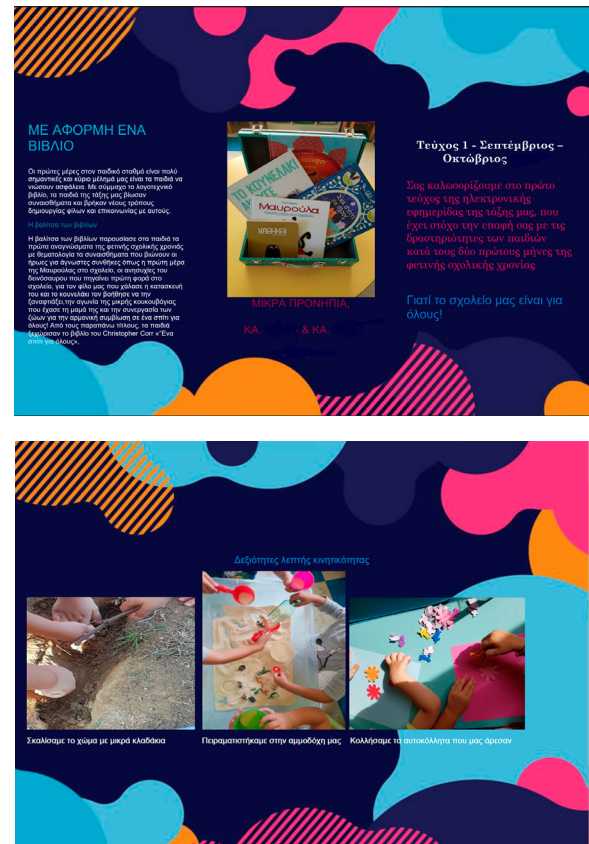
Parents often wonder how their children's day at school was. What were they involved in? What did they experiment with? What activities were they occupied with? Some children are talkative and provide parents with information about their school activities while others don't. This is usually the case for younger children and children of a different cultural background as their language skills are not well developed and the transfer of such knowledge is even harder.

In an attempt to encourage children to talk about and share their thoughts and ideas, a digital newspaper was created at the beginning of the school year. Initially, the aim was to inform families quickly and straightforwardly about the activities that took place within the preschool setting. By doing so, parents would enable children to discuss their daily school encounters and enhance their language skills.

The picture below is an example of the front cover of the first digital newspaper of the school year. Information about the topics discussed was given alongside photographs of the books that the children enjoyed listening to as well as the activities that were carried out throughout the day. This information formed a stimulus for discussion between parents and children at home as well as between parents and educators in the early years setting. In an attempt to encourage children to talk about and

share their thoughts and ideas, a digital newspaper was created at the beginning of the school year. Matsumoto et. al. (2021) denote that ‘if we value expanding and enriching communication to enhance young children’s participation, we must recognise nonverbal communication forms as essential in hearing children’s voices. A visual form, like photo documentation, would make activities in ECEC settings more visible for young children and adults than written reports’ (p. 796). In this respect, we believe, diverse family settings could be equally benefited. As previously researchers have highlighted the use of photographs or visual stimuli in early childhood education enables educators to verify children’s learning and provides a platform for motivating and encouraging children’s communication skills (Stamatoglou, 2006; Walters, 2006). The preparation of multiple modalities that do not include texts could be used on one hand as a pedagogical documentation for children and on the other could bridge communication gaps in diverse family settings as all participants could assess the documentation, irrespective of their cultural background, and also develop willingness to participate, as language would not constitute a barrier.

It is worth noting that parental consent and children’s assent were granted before taking the photographs and it was made clear that children’s faces were not to be seen in any of the photographs nor the children’s identity would be revealed. Captions (images 1 & 2) were incorporated to inform parents about the aim and educational purpose of the activities as well as the reactions of the children whilst engaged in these activities. In this regard photographs and other visual materials were used where children’s activities were presented in chronological order. Another example from the digital newspaper included a visual timeline enhanced with captions that engaged parents in reflecting on the activities themselves, such as ‘Look carefully in the way children chose to represent the meaning of PEACE’. By doing so parents could pose further questions to their children such as ‘What does the word PEACE mean to you?’ ‘What made you draw PEACE in the way you did?’ The result was for parents to focus on the educational content of the preschool setting’s activities and begin to develop more constructive and more focused dialogues with their children. Captions were incorporated to inform parents about the aim and educational purpose of the activities as well as the reactions of the children whilst engaged in these activities. We believe that these captions could also guide parents in supporting activities at home since, according to the literature, ‘a family-based perspective’ includes what all parents and other family members do to help their children learn and grow (Gregoriadis et al., 2023). From a family-based perspective, learning is broadly defined, beyond school-based academic learning’ (Hill, 2022, p. 310). Thus, parents could inform their practices through the information they receive while reading the digital newspaper and expand children’s home-based activities to support children’s learning at school, (i.e. by giving children access to similar book titles and activities and encouraging dissemination of the results of such practices either with the children’s educators or with other families.



Images 1 & 2 Front page and another page of the digital newspaper

Digital classroom

Once families and children became accustomed with this procedure of being informed through the digital newspaper on a bi-monthly basis, the digital classroom was set in motion. While all completed classroom activities were presented in the digital newspaper, where all themes and topics discussed were published in the making and the aim was the co-configuration of the content of these practices with all members involved.

In particular, the digital classroom provided parents with the opportunity to post, discuss and reply to a multimodal material (such as texts, pictures, photographs, video, symbols etc). and to create discussion groups and share multimedia material (such as internet sources and links as well as games amongst others). The variety of the posted and produced material encouraged significantly the active involvement of every member as through its diversity it supported various forms and rates of the use of communication. Photographs were used to enable children to remember details of the activity and describe the sequence while parents had to connect the information given to them through the detailed activity information provided. The links lead to the audiovisual material that in connection with the ideas for play and out-of-class explorations provided ways of interaction and strengthened the involvement of parents as well as children. This was carried out through a multisensory manner (for instance, *'You can too try at home to ...'* *'When at home, wait and look carefully at a ...'*). These missions, as we called them, constituted a favourite preoccupation of the children and their significant adults and linked the educational activities with the lived daily experiences of all the participants in non- typical learning environments (family, community, natural environment). In particular, the digital classroom provided parents with the opportunity to post, discuss and reply to a multimodal material (such as texts, pictures, photographs, video, symbols etc). As mentioned earlier, different forms of communication provide families with incentives for parents to overcome communication barriers by developing multiple ways of expressing themselves. Also, audiovisual material (photos, videos), digital symbols, and web platforms are flexible tools that come from a common digital culture and help intergenerational and intercultural communication between members, empowering active participation in learning (Girod & Cavanaugh, 2001; Hammond, 2000). Through this multimodal approach, literacy variations can act as a compensatory factor by mitigating linguistic and cultural differences.

Below we give an example of the theme of 'WATER' that was presented to children in order to discuss the phenomenon of turning water into ice. Children and educators choose natural materials from the schoolyard and place them into small containers including a piece of rope and water. Then the children are divided into groups according to their initial ideas and place their containers in different parts of the school (inside and outside the classroom, in the fridge, in the freezer). They notice similarities, differences, and changes and record their assumptions, thoughts, and observations. Each group presents their initial ideas, their experiments, and their observations. Children and educators choose natural materials from the school yard and place them into small containers including a piece of rope and water.

Such hands-on activities mobilise interaction between family members and encourage participation. They make use of connections to everyday life issues and practices, where all members can get involved and express their opinions, ideas and observations (Gregoriadis, et. al., 2023). Solving small everyday problems provides opportunities for collaboration and critical thinking development in a context of utilizing and highlighting the socio-cultural elements of each family (Papandreou & Konstantinidou, 2020).

The parents' and the children's notes (image 3) are posted on the platform *[a] it will freeze in the freezer and my mom when she puts water it becomes ice cubes [...] it became ice and came off all -together, b) it will freeze in the yard because it is cold outside [..] it hasn't changed at all, it's still water...].* The containers are then taken home where the children are encouraged to keep the frozen decoration. Families are encouraged to take notes on an observation sheet and post them on the platform. Thus, an intra-group exchange of information begins in a context of creating shared experiences, since everyone is working

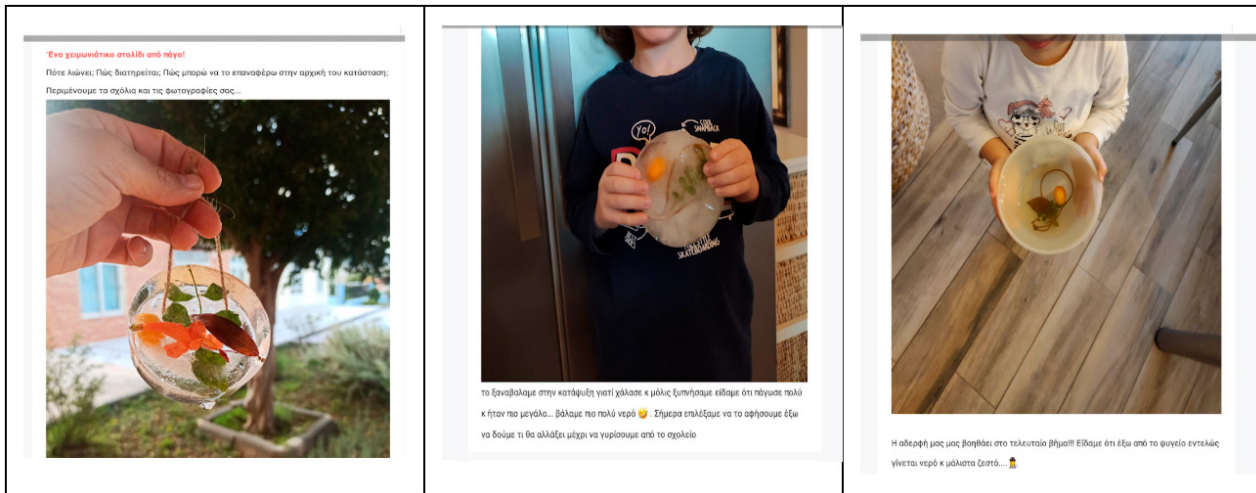


Image 3 Interactions and communication at school and out of school on the occasion of an experiment

in different ways on a common problem «To keep the frozen decoration in the same form». During this process, children try to transfer to the family environment information from school and vice versa. In this way, a heterogeneous learning community is created where each member tries to contribute to the extent and pace he can. The experiences and observations of each group (school) and each family (home) are brought together to serve a common purpose, the solution of the common problem.

Table 1 Children's observations based on the WATER project

Mission:	The children made a frozen ornament from nature's materials. Notice the ways they thought of to create it. Next task is to keep it in the same form. Continue the tests at home and share your experiences with the rest of the class. When does it melt? How is it maintained? How can I restore it to its original state?
Child 1:	My sister is helping us with the last step! We saw that the outside of the refrigerator completely becomes water and even hot....
Child 1:	We put it back in the freezer because it was spoiled and as soon as we woke up we saw that it had frozen a lot and was bigger. We put in more water. Today we chose to leave it outside and see what changes until we get home from school.
Child 2:	The next experiment was to put it in the refrigerator preservation... and we saw that the ornament melted by the time we got home from school but the water was frozen.

A music culture share through decades

A radio project proved useful in involving parents in a topic that the children showed an interest in at school. Children explored their interest in how music is shared between listeners today, but also in the past alongside their parents and educators. So, their investigation took a new turn. Children were encouraged to observe the places and ways in which music auditions are held today. The aim was to actively involve families in these instigations, as the musical culture of each family was seen as a channel of communication between home and school (Esimone & Ojukwu, 2014). In the same line Papadopoulos (2020) highlights the importance in developing children's communication skills by adding cultural stimuli to children's daily encounters as well as enabling them to collaborate with each other while at the same time they explore other educational material. Children explored their interest in how music is

shared between listeners today, but also in the past alongside their parents and educators. Whilst families are involved in the educational process they transfer their personal experiences and through them aspects of their culture. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge enhances social cohesion, communication and interaction between different age groups (Chen, 1997) cultivating cultural competence (Bennet & Castiglioni, 2004). These multiple intakes of stimuli promote diversity and respect for others leading to cultural awareness.

Children had a recording sheet at their disposal on which they noted their observations in any way they could. They were then encouraged to conduct interviews in the form of discussion and/or telling personal stories from significant adults in their family environment. At the same time, the families were informed through a letter about the topic that the children were working on and a note to keep the children’s interest in research as much as possible. This had as its main point that children’s questions were not answered directly but rather led to further reflection and by actively involving family members in investigations. Through this process shared experiences were created between family members that were later transferred to the school triggering the educational process.

Participants recalled personal experiences focusing on the socio-cultural tools of each era. Musical instruments with different timbres and machines with different functions conveyed to the school not only information about the technological development over time, but above all the unique musical culture of each family. In particular, they identified the use of playback machines with the space where they could listen to music and the way in which they could make use of them to concretize their musical listening of choice. On the other hand, they commented that songs have the ability to convey experiences and keep vivid images and feelings of the past. Participants recalled personal experiences focusing on the socio-cultural tools of each era. Music is an important form of language (Elliot, 1989) that promotes communication through the exchange and circulation of experiences and emotions (Tillman, 1997). The main characteristic of music is that it conveys elements of people’s culture (Nettl, 1983). In the same line, devices that reproduce music are important socio-cultural tools as they characterise each generation through the conditions of their use and the possibilities of transmitting the verbal and non-verbal meanings they convey, and at the same time creating personal and social identities that can be used to form personal and social relationships.

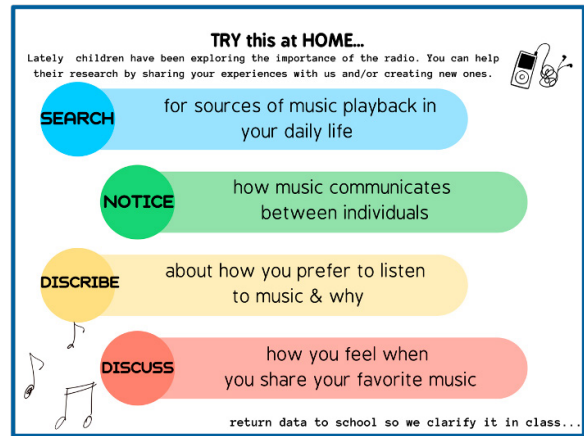


Image 4 Letter to families for the creation of shared music experiences

Table 2 Adult responses on the Radio project

Adult 1:	In the past (with tape) I couldn't wait to hear my favorite song. Then when the ipods came out I could pick it straight up and listen to it on repeat without a hitch. I could also listen to the radio or shuffle the songs.
Child:	My grandfather has something round like plates called trays. The songs are written on there and when you put them on a tool that turns it a needle that is pointed touches it and plays music. But you can't take it with you wherever you go. You should only listen to music in the room that the music is played in.
Adult 2:	When I listen to the songs I used to listen to as a child, it's like traveling back to my childhood. Many times on the radio I might hear a song like that. I close my eyes and find myself back in my favorite place with my friends, we laugh and dance!

Some families brought music playlists with their favorite songs, others musical devices and others suggested frequencies of their favorite radio stations. All the material was organized in a spare music library located at the entrance of the school. Through this process, the participants had the opportunity to exchange music and come into contact with different cultures, music genres, and cultures. This practice fueled the children's discussions in the plenary session, while at the same time motivating the adults to exchange opinions, interact and communicate inside and outside of school (*«I had the same walkman and listened to them...»*, *«They were my favorites too! Especially the song...»*).

This information was collected and processed by the children who then posted selected notes on the class documentation board in order to focus on the learning path emerging from their investigations. The kindergarten teacher reinforced the content of the board with photos and captions from excerpts of the participants' narratives and from short texts that focused attention on specific achievements of the children (*“observe the advantages of music players vs the radio through the eyes of the children”, “focus on the feelings that the children captured through the drawing, after listening to the musical piece below”*). This practice was aimed at monitoring the learning process through multimodal material, with the aim of strengthening the participation of young children (students and siblings) as well as foreign parents. The content of the board was dynamic. This means that it was refreshed whenever the children's research led to questions being answered and/or new ones being created. In order to communicate the data to families, the documentation board was moved to the school entrance to be accessible by both students and their families, fueling presentations, discussions and the exchange of ideas between children and adults (McWayne, Melzi, & Mistry, 2022). The content of the board was dynamic. The fact that documentation boards support communication in a multimodal way (Damjanovic et al., 2017; Stacey, 2015) encourages native and foreign participants' involvement, while visual representations connect teaching to the learning process (Kim & Yu, 2022). This action is ongoing and promotes the renegotiation of content in relation to the process (MacDonald, 2007).



Image 5 Music devices through decades

Discussion

The practices presented in this article provide information of how these were adopted in and out of the classroom as part of its philosophy and influence the children's learning processes. Home school cooperation, although considered crucial, is often avoided as stated in the literature based on difficulties either educators or parents face (Alevriadou et al., 2008; Roffey, 2012; Deslandes, 2019).

The examples presented earlier provide information that is simple and accessible to every early years educator. In this regard, the authors suggest the use of:

- a. a documentation panel where the learning process of children is presented through multimodal material, taking into account that young children and foreign parents and participants find it difficult to follow long texts in the main language. Images and photographs help significantly

in this direction. These documentation panels according to Aras & Erden (2019) enhance not only children's learning but also their metacognitive abilities. Captions also help readers focus on small, specific pieces of information that are meaningful to children and their research. In this way, parents do not focus only on what their child «did», but on the overall journey of inquiry which was a team effort with participants from both learning environments, family and school (Aras & Erden, 2019; Birbili, 2011; Liljestrand, & Hammarberg, 2017).

- b.** a digital newspaper which, in connection to the documentation notice board presented above, presented children's daily learning experiences to their parents in an electronic form. This newspaper was bi-monthly and informed parents about their children's learning processes with the use of photographs from various activities that protected children's personal characteristics and identity. Parents were then asked to comment on the newspaper and suggest future topics of investigation (Simon & Dan, 2017).
- c.** the digital classroom, which is an alternative form of newspaper not only in the form of information, but mainly in the form of co-configuration by its users. Thus, all members have an editorial and authorial role. This process requires coordination, cooperation and communication and inevitably pushes members into interactions. The use of images, chat, emotions and reactions help to include and actively involve young members and foreign adults where the production and reading of written texts may be difficult or impossible. Furthermore, the possibility of remote communication and engagement at the personal time and pace of each member motivates participation and enhances involvement (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2004).
- d.** letters to the families, in the form of a short note that focuses on what children do in the classroom and how families can help, but without directing their actions and limiting their imaginations. The purpose is to create common experiences through the utilization of the socio-cultural background of each family. Culture, previous experiences and civilization are factors that we as teachers are called to strengthen and through the learning process to encourage their transfer from home to school and vice versa. In this way, the children take home the culture of the class, and the class welcomes the culture of each individual student. This leads not only to mutual respect but also to knowledge, familiarity and interaction with other cultures, customs, and traditions. According to Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999, p. 144) 'all pedagogical activity can be seen as a social construction by human agents, in which the child, the pedagogue and the whole milieu of the early childhood institution are understood as socially constituted through language. However, this perspective also implies that this activity is open to change; if we choose to construct pedagogical activity in one way, we can also choose to reconstruct it in another, and in our case, this is supported by including the parental viewpoint in the process (Driessen, Smita & Slegers, 2005).
- e.** the open recording sheets are intended to mobilize the collection of information and their recording multimodally (drawings, texts, images, photographs, etc.). They also involve the whole family, and not just the student, in a continuous process of searching and sharing information. These sheets go back and forth between the two environments (home-school) and are gradually filled in throughout the investigation. They are presented in plenary accompanied by other evidence (e.g. musical devices), posted on the documentation board, and exchanged between participants, thus providing multidimensional recording and information possibilities between learning environments and participants. As Forman and Hall (2005) support the process of observation, documentation, and interpretation of children's goals, strategies, and theories, teachers gain insight into children's thinking. So, we as early educators are able to engage children in discussions and investigations in order to extend their knowledge.
- f.** sociocultural tools such as music which is an important part of every person's culture and a way of expressing and communicating their feelings, perceptions, and traditions (Esimone & Ojukwu,

2014). The musical works that each person chooses to listen to are different precisely because each person's personality is different. Also, they are often identified with experiences, experiences, and circumstances. For this reason, they carry an emotional and cultural charge. In the preceding example, music players are sociocultural tools as their function has been shown to influence their use and vice versa (McWayne, Melzi, & Mistry, 2022). The fact that a vinyl can only be listened to in a specific space unlike the iPod which can be listened to anywhere, can affect the type of listening, the images/places it accompanies and the people the listening is shared with. On the other hand, the number of musical works that each device allows, and their easy or non-localization can affect the repeated and focused listening of specific works. These observations were made by the children based on the narratives of the adults during the discussions that emerged from the devices themselves. In other words, we observe that they functioned as socio-cultural tools, which, beyond their use, include information and elements about the culture, culture, era, and everyday life of their users. Such tools connect the two learning environments through images and experiences of children's daily lives, helping them understand the world around them and communicate intergenerationally.

Conclusion

In summary, this article tried to provide evidence that home-school partnerships in early years settings is not only feasible but also important (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Bryan & Henry, 2012). Examples of such partnerships were presented to support the enhancement of school-family cooperation that must be implemented in a modern context, where one environment will mobilize and encourage the other with the aim of highlighting and developing young children's learning experiences. Young children, their families and their educators are interrelated in a cyclical, active, and interactive process of learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). In this direction, it is considered necessary to utilize practices that promote quality practices, such as participatory learning and communication, taking into account and making use at the same time, of the cultural background of each student individually and as a whole. This is only possible when the school doors and premises are open and is linked to the home environment, whilst it embraces all members in the light of inclusion, respect and active listening (Driessen, Smita & Slegers, 2005). This should not be practiced superficially but substantively and practically, developing a whole school culture in which the family has an active and participatory role. Engaging parents and the community is regarded as crucial in the enhancement of children's overall development (Honingh, Bondarouk, & Brandsen, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2020) and it is linked with the opportunities and channels of communication provided to families (OECD, 2017). Thus, the interaction between families and school as well as between families' interaction is seen as of equal importance. The aim is for members of the school community and families to increase engagement motivation and at the same time disgrace diversity. Therefore, it is suggested that educators participate in seminars and in learning communities (nationally and internationally), in order to exchange and evaluate experiences, practices, and educational tools.

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