


RESEARCH ARTICLES

Participation of Fathers in Chilean Private Kindergartens: Perceived Conditions of Possibilities

Participación de padres varones en jardines infantiles privados chilenos: condiciones de posibilidad percibidas

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Summary

There is scholarly consensus that the involvement of fathers in preschool education optimizes child-adolescent development. However, in practice, fathers' participation is low compared to that of mothers. This article presents the results of a qualitative study aimed to exploring the perceptions of fathers with children who attend private educational centers in Chile about the conditions that encourage or discourage them from participating in their children's activities at school. Semi structured interviews were held with fathers of children who attend 8 preschools. The article reveals positive attitudes toward participation which are hindered by cultural, structural, and institutional factors. Conditions of possibility become privatized and come to depend on the ability to reach agreements among parental figures. This study contributes to the scientific understanding of the conditions affecting the participation of fathers in early education. The implications of these findings for parental involvement policies and the work of educational institutions are discussed.

Keywords: Fathers involvement; Preschool education; Private school; Qualitative research.

Resumen

Existe consenso entre investigadores, que la participación de padres varones en la educación parvularia optimiza el desarrollo infanto-juvenil. Sin embargo, en la práctica esta participación es baja si se la compara con la de las mujeres. Este artículo expone los resultados de una investigación cualitativa cuyo objetivo es el de explorar la percepción que, padres varones con hijos e hijas que asisten a centros educativos privados chilenos, tienen sobre las condiciones que posibilitan o no su participación en el centro educativo. Se utilizan 8 entrevistas semiestructuradas. El artículo devela disposiciones a participar que se ven coaccionadas por factores culturales, estructurales e institucionales. Las condiciones de posibilidad se privatizan y dependen de la capacidad de negociar acuerdos entre figuras parentales. Este estudio aporta a la comprensión de las condiciones que afectan la participación de los padres varones en la educación inicial. Se discuten implicancias para las políticas de participación parental y el trabajo de las instituciones educativas.

Palabras claves: Participación; Padres varones; Educación inicial; Educación privada; Investigación cualitativa.

INTRODUCTION

Father involvement in early childhood education is considered a crucial factor in children's early education quality. The evidence consulted has shown substantial benefits for academic development, personal confidence, and the ability to bond and stimulate resilience against difficulties from early childhood (Yağan & Ata, 2018).

This importance has been recognized and promoted by educational policies in many countries around the world. For instance, the "Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative" stands out in the United States, which is a program aimed at promoting parental co-responsibility, with special emphasis on fathers who want to be present in their children's lives and who are unable to do so, for various reasons. The United Kingdom has the "Office for Standards in Education" which oversees teamwork between parents and caregivers to monitor educational quality, and imposes sanctions ranging from fines to the total closure of the establishment in the event of a non-compliance (Cortázar & Falabella, 2015). The country also has "The Fatherhood Institute" which provides advice to fathers and encourages the consideration of male figures in areas that structurally are usually linked to the maternal figure (parenting, education, and early stimulation) (Cabrera & Peters, 2000; Madrid, 2016; Pattnaik & Srirarm, 2012).

In the case of Chile, the educational quality policies for Early Childhood and Basic Education establish clear parameters for family involvement. They do not make a gender distinction as is observed in other countries (Undersecretary of Early Childhood Education, 2018).

This background is confronted with the fact that, in practice, father involvement is low compared to mother involvement (whether or not she is the student's mother). This is shown by the Repository of information on time use in Latin America and the Caribbean (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2019) concluding that men are the least involved in household chores and unpaid care. The Dominican Republic (3.8%) and Guatemala (2.9%) stand out among the countries with the lowest involvement. A similar trend is observed in the United States and Indonesia, where women continue to be the main family conversational partners for kindergartens (McWayne et al., 2019). However, finding countries with higher percentages of father involvement, such as the cases of Cuba (12.5%) and Chile (10.8%), the difference observed compared to women is very large (ECLAC, 2019).

The studies addressing father involvement in educational institutions as the object studied are scarce (Madrid, 2016). Among these studies are those that analyze them from the perspective of availability and use of time, showing limitations related to the workday and travel times between workplaces, home, and educational institutions in large cities. These difficulties leave little time to get involved in school activities unless special work permits are available to that end.

It has also been suggested that educational institutions are not organized to work with fathers due to the preeminence of a school culture that still separates family responsibilities according to sex (Cabrera et al., 2018).

Other studies suggest more father involvement in private educational institutions than what is observed in public educational centers (Gessaghi, 2017; Gubbins & Otero, 2020; Luci & Gessaghi, 2016; Madrid, 2016). This background invites us to question the conditions that make it possible, particularly from the subjectivity regarding private kindergartens (Madrid, 2016).

The scarce information available regarding this topic hinders a better understanding of the conditions that make it possible or not, affecting the ability of educational institutions to identify problems, needs, interests, possibilities, and solutions that contribute to increasing father involvement in the processes of improving early childhood development quality and the work of educational centers in this field. The above is directly related to the postulates of Alcalay et al. (2005), mentioning that: "there is no clarity regarding what is expected from father involvement nor are there clear guidelines on how to achieve adequate involvement" (p. 2). As Madrid (2016) suggests, if there is already little information about father involvement in public educational institutions, much less is known about what happens in kindergartens that educate the country's elites.

The purpose of this article is to explore the perception of fathers whose children attend a private kindergarten in Santiago, Chile, about the conditions that make their involvement in the educational center possible or impossible. This study seeks to contribute knowledge regarding the perspective of the conditions that make their involvement in private kindergartens possible or impossible and contribute to making visible the voice of an educational agent that receives less attention from the decision-makers of educational and school policies.

Conceptual Framework of Reference

The study of father involvement has been approached from different perspectives. From a gender perspective, it is postulated that gender arises as a social construct that differentiates men and women according to biological criteria. The Program for the United Nations (UNDP, 2019) posits that gender acts as a concept that positions men as the ones who deploy their skills in the public area and women as dependents who deploy their activities only in the private area (household and reproductive life). The first report on the new map of power and gender in Chile (UNDP, 2019) suggests the emergence of what is called "New Masculinities" normally associated with more educationally advantaged men. What is proposed here is that the discourse of these men expresses a positive valuation of higher gender equity in terms of family responsibilities. This discourse does not necessarily correspond to a congruent practice. The desire of fathers to become actively involved in the care of their children is reported but, at the same time, there are complaints regarding its feasibility due to external factors derived from the scarce contextual support in terms of culture and public policies (Aguayo et al., 2011).

In the particular context of early childhood education, McWayne et al. (2019) propose relying on the eco-cultural parental involvement approach (Weisner, 2002). These authors suggest the importance of incorporating in the analysis the cultural patterns that regulate parent-filial educational practices (such as sleeping, eating, going out for walks, studying, etc.) as "culture is the preeminent tool that children learn to adapt to life" (Weisner, 2002, p. 277). These guidelines permeate how parental involvement actions are understood, produced, and reproduced, among which the modes of father involvement in Early Childhood Education cannot be exempted. From this perspective, the approach to their involvement in early childhood education refers to the initiative and ways how these men get involved and maintain contact with the kindergarten.

Other authors such as Fabiano and Pyle (2019) suggest supplementing this perspective by incorporating other dimensions in its study such as (1) their involvement in parenting in terms of support, guidance, and relationship with their children, (2) stimulating the development of academic skills related to the literacy of their children at home (reading, doing homework), and (3) fostering relationships with peers. Authors such as Epstein (2009) proposes six possible types of involvement that have to do with parenting, homeschooling, volunteering, institutional decision-making, cooperation with the community, and two-way communication with teachers.

However, it is suggested considering that there is no unique expected involvement model. Empirically, it has been observed that father involvement also varies according to the sex and age of their offspring, the family structure, the influence of separation or divorce, their previous experiences, and other psychosocial aspects such as excessive alcohol consumption and intrafamily violence (McWayne et al., 2019).

Among the conditions that make father involvement in early childhood education possible or impossible, LaRocque et al. (2011) allude to 1) Emotional barriers produced by mistrust between teachers and families, 2) Language barriers because it may seem scientific or abstract to families and make the relationship between teachers and fathers an impersonal experience, which may intimidate fathers, 3) Physical barriers referring to problems of transporting from/to work, home and school, and difficulties in organizing childcare, 4) Cultural differences as cultures differ in the way they express their concern for the child, and (5) Psychological barriers such as psychological illnesses, trauma and previous experiences with kindergarten that cause rejection and some fathers' lack of knowledge and insecurity regarding how to relate to teachers and their female peers, and how to get involved in the activities organized by kindergartens.

Kocyigit (2015) suggests paying more attention to the time factor due to the time incompatibility that is usually found between the schedules of educational institutions and those of the regular working day described by the countries, the language barriers which arise in the case of migrant families, the economic difficulties of families, and even teacher favoritism perceived by fathers, among others.

METHOD

Type of Study

This study is framed within a comprehensive paradigm, in the sense that it is oriented to "the understanding of human experience, as it is lived and felt by the participants, within a particular context" (Schwandt, 1990 cited by González, 2001, p. 13). The study design is qualitative, of an exploratory/descriptive type of the perception of fathers whose children attend a Chilean private kindergarten about the conditions that make their involvement in the educational center possible or impossible. In other words, revealing the study phenomenon from the subjectivity of those directly involved. The study was conducted in Santiago, Chile between May and September 2020.

Participants

A purposive convenience sampling was carried out according to the following inclusion criterion: fathers residing in the Metropolitan Region whose children attend a private kindergarten located in the same region of residence. The Metropolitan Region has the largest population compared to the other regions of the country (National Institute of Statistics, 2018), and is where the largest number of private Kindergartens are located (Undersecretary of Early Childhood Education, 2020) certified by the Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC). The Official State Recognition (R.O.) ensures compliance with minimum requirements of the quality of the educational establishment from the pedagogical perspective, and infrastructure, among others (National Council for Nursery Schools, 2019).

In order to guarantee the principle of heterogeneity, it was considered relevant that the sample was made up of male parents who actively participate in the educational centers together with others who do not. The sample consisted of eight (8) fathers from eight private kindergartens with common residences in the different communes of Santiago de Chile. All the participants have varied occupations (academics, sociologists, industrial civil engineers) and have paying jobs outside home. Of the total number of participants, four (4) hold graduate degrees, and four have completed higher education. The average age is 38 years old. Of the total sample, two (2) fathers are separated and living at home without their children (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Characteristics of Participants

ID	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Occupation	Workday	Commune of Residence	Number of Children
ID1	36 years old	Married	Graduate	Academic Management Professional	Full-time	Providencia	1
ID2	38 years old	Married	Graduate	Sociologist	Full-time	Providencia	2
ID3	44 years old	Married	Graduate	Industrial Civil Engineer	Full-time (teleworking)	Vitacura	1
ID4	42 years old	Married	Completed higher education	Freelancer	Freelance	San Bernardo	3
ID5	38 years old	Married	Graduate	Economist	Full-time	Vitacura	2
ID6	36 years old	Married	Completed higher education	Community Development	Full-time (teleworking)	Vitacura	2
ID7	36 years old	Separated	Completed higher education	IT	Full-time	Las Condes	2
ID8	34 years old	Unmarried	Completed higher education	Municipal Coordination	Full-time	San Miguel	1

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Information Production Techniques

The semi-structured interview technique was used (Beaud, 2018) for data production, constructed from the subjectivity of the human subjects participating in this study. This type of interview is supported by scripts with questions that seek to respond to each study objective, and, at the same time, it constitutes a flexible resource open to new topics and perceptions reported by the interviewees (Martínez, 1998 cited by Díaz-Bravo et al., 2013). It is worth mentioning that given the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online via the Meet and Zoom platforms at times convenient to the interviewees. The video call was prioritized to create an experience as close as possible to a face-to-face semi-structured interview (O'Grady, 2022). These platforms provide the video call tool and the option to record (with the participant's consent).

Firstly, it was considered necessary to develop a general guide of questions based on some deductive categories (see Table 2) derived from a theoretical and empirical background in the area of father involvement in early childhood education centers. As Díaz-Bravo et al. (2013) point out, having a question guide in the first interviews provides structure but also openness and flexibility to address emerging issues in the different interviews being conducted.

Table 2.

Conceptualization and Approaches used by the Latin American Research Studies analyzed

Dimensions	Subdimensions
Type of involvement	Parenting Homeschooling Volunteering Communication with the teachers Cooperation with the community Institutional decision-making
Involvement obstructors	Language barriers Physical barriers Psychological barriers Time barriers Linguistic barriers
Facilitators of involvement in educational centers	Regulations Policies and programs Choice of establishment

Source: Elaborated by the author

Procedure

To access the sample, we contacted key informants from different kindergartens, who provided a list with names of fathers considered "participative" and another list of "low" involvement in the activities organized by the kindergartens. The invitation was sent by the responsible researcher via e-mail to each of the potential participants, informing them of the study objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation. The approach to the human subjects coincided with the confinement, governmentally required by the pandemic as a consequence of COVID-19. This decision caused the closure of many kindergartens (public and private), making access to the sample difficult. This situation made it necessary to supplement the strategy with the snowball technique (Martín-Crespo & Salamanca, 2007). Voluntary participation was formalized by signing a consent form, which was sent by e-mail to the participants to the researcher responsible for the study. This study has the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Finis Terrae.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was assigned an ID along with a number (e.g., ID1, ID2, ID3, ... ID8) for identification, indicating age, educational level, and occupation.

Information Analysis

The data analysis method was based on grounded theory. This method "provides rigorous but flexible guidelines that begin by exploring and openly analyzing the data induction and leads to developing a theory based on the data" (Flick, 2014, p.153). Firstly, a descriptive analysis of the information obtained from the interviews was open coded to develop emergent categories that were matched with successive coding. Relationships were built by applying axial coding that allowed the information to be organized into dimensions that responded to the study objectives to ultimately, thanks to selective coding, achieve consistency and refinement of the theory to be presented (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). All these procedural steps were cross-checked among the researchers following the principles of reliability of qualitative research to prevent interpretative biases.

RESULTS

In general terms, the results obtained from this analysis suggest that fathers with children attending kindergartens are willing to become actively involved in the activities of the educational centers. This willingness is conditioned by various cultural, structural, and institutional factors, which are detailed below.

Fathers: A Crucial Actor in Early Childhood Education

It is important to begin by pointing out that the fathers interviewed acknowledge the importance of active involvement in the school life of their children. They attribute even more value to it as it relates to the first years of children's academic, social, and emotional development. The interviewees acknowledge the importance of supporting the educational work carried out by early education institutions and the attendance of children to kindergartens that goes beyond considering it as a social care system. Early childhood education is seen as a resource that optimizes children's development and learning. The following quote shows this view of early childhood education:

I try to cooperate, support that work and recognize it as well. I avoid seeing it as a mere service of... "taking care of the child" (ID1, 36 years old, Ph.D., academic management professional).

The importance attributed to father support to the educational processes in the classroom is expressed in the attention paid to the daily transporting of children to kindergartens and their in-person involvement in formal activities such as parent-teacher meetings and personal interviews with teachers. Particularly valued are those meetings where topics of interest, such as progress and achievements in the child's development, their behavior in the classroom, and peer relationships, among others, are discussed.

Likewise, casual and informal meetings with teachers and/or kindergarten management at the beginning or end of the school day. They are particularly valued spaces since they allow gathering institutional information from a first source and/or promptly resolving questions and concerns related to the development of the children and their behavior during the school day. However, the analysis allows inferring that the emphasis of their involvement is centered at home

and particularly referred to the review of notebooks that kindergartens use to communicate in writing with the families of their students and the information transmitted by e-mails. By way of illustration, the following quote:

Participating in parent-teacher meetings (...) taking co-responsibility, let's say, for picking him up, dropping him off, and talking to the teachers there to find out about his work, his progress, I don't know (ID1, 36 years old, Ph.D., academic management professional).

Thus, those interviewed in this study understand that they play a significant role in child development, supplementary to the educational work carried out by early childhood education centers. As pointed out by McWayne et al. (2019), fathers do not attend all the formal activities organized by the kindergarten. Their involvement is generally concentrated in activities at home, such as reading and/or helping with homework requested by the kindergartens to be done by the students at home (Fabiano & Pyle, 2019).

Father Involvement as an Expression of New Couple Arrangements

Father involvement in private centers is an issue that is discussed as a couple (even before the children enter the early childhood education system). Their involvement in kindergartens is defined as basic and as fundamental as that of mothers. The willingness to make couple arrangements in terms of the distribution of roles and responsibilities at school and home is a family condition that favors the development of practices congruent with the involvement desires of fathers. These arrangements also consider decisions regarding working hours and working conditions in favor of an adequate and satisfactory family-work-childcare center conciliation for both caregivers. The parental role is defined based on the principle of equality in terms of responsibility for the educational development of the children, and the agreement as a couple (Yağan & Ata, 2018). Returning to the account of a young university professional:

I think that the conception I have with XX of agreeing on the way of taking care of the children and this vision that we have of being a little more egalitarian in the relationship, of the roles and all that... Well, luckily, my wife and I have jobs that allow us being at home a lot, (...) which in these times has helped us be with the children and work with them (ID2, 38 years old, Completed higher education, with a Master's degree, Sociologist).

In other cases, women of an extended family play a relevant supporting role in the care of the children (for example, mothers-in-law, mothers, or aunts). Decisions are also made jointly. Interest in facilitating father involvement and preventing their distancing from the educational experiences of their children is an issue that is addressed in the family. These results recall the postulates of Bronfenbrenner (1994) who suggests that the family is a support network for the moments when fathers and mothers cannot get involved. As pointed out by the following interviewee who, when noting that he was unable to participate actively in his child's kindergarten, decided with his family to work as a freelancer.

I become quite distant, and that is why we talked about it with my family, and I became a freelancer (in terms of work) (ID4, 42 years old, completed higher education, freelancer).

Most of the participants in this study live with working partners. However, participants acknowledge that generally speaking, not all couples can afford to get involved in childcare at home and activities at educational centers. This background recalls what was raised by Cabrera et al. (2018), who suggest that this difficulty particularly affects divorced fathers who usually reduce their involvement in kindergartens. Difficulties in reaching agreements and the preeminence of residence of children with their mothers appear as significant obstructors of active and systematic involvement in educational centers. If this dynamic changes, then father involvement is recovered.

In summary, among the perceived facilitating conditions is, in the first place, the structure of gender relations at the couple level based on co-responsibility and the climate of couple relationships and couple communication oriented towards understanding and agreement. This makes it possible to reconcile an adequate fulfillment of work, educational, and childcare demands for men and women. In the second place, the possibility of having an extended support network, which, for these interviewees, refers to the women of the father's and/or mother's birth family.

These fathers acknowledge that these couple arrangements do not necessarily respond to the emergence of new cultural patterns associated with the sexual division of care between men and women. These arrangements are negotiated on an individual basis. The couple arrangement is strongly strained by societal factors that transcend the human subjects' capacity for change (e.g.,

work schedules for dependent workers, distance and travel time between school, work, and home, among others). As one young sociologist suggests:

I have also seen other fathers, I don't know, that have not yet incorporated that issue, a whole social cultural issue (...) although there may be an issue of awareness that one can contribute to care and everything, but there is no vision that one has and should do so (ID2, 38 years old, completed Higher Education, with a Master's Degree, Sociologist).

Time as a Condition for Father Involvement

Among the conditions that influence the greater or lesser presence in educational center activities is the time available. Work-related demands, particularly for dependent workers, the time it takes to travel to/from kindergarten and home in the big city, and, in the case of divorced fathers, to/from the children's home and their own, are aspects that condition where and when to get involved. The account of an academic is contrasted with that of a freelancer in the sense that, for the former, residing near the workplace and the kindergarten is a key facilitator of his involvement in the educational centers when compared with that reported by the freelancer, who highlights the main difficulties in this regard he faced when he was a dependent worker:

I mean, I work 15 minutes away by walk from the XX's kindergarten and now from the school as well, 15 minutes at most, I mean, and I am lucky to live very close to my work (ID1, 36 years old, Ph.D., academic management professional).

Imagine. I crossed almost all of Santiago. I ended up leaving at six or seven o'clock and arrived home at nine o'clock, so my life was going by, that is the truth (ID4, 42 years old, completed higher education, freelancer).

From the structural point of view, the availability of time depends on the willingness of employers to grant fathers permission so that they can participate in meetings or activities at the educational centers at times that are incompatible with work-related demands. Asking for permission brings with it significant tensions in reconciling family and work responsibilities.

Freelancers, or those who work under teleworking, are the ones who report more freedom to adjust their schedules and flexibly meet the various demands and responsibilities that arise in their daily lives.

Following what was raised by Kocyigit (2015), time becomes a structural condition that can facilitate or obstruct father involvement practices; notwithstanding, their interest in doing so. This condition is related to external factors that cannot be altered by fathers, so their actions are conditioned to the time margin allowed by work-related, territorial, and transportation constraints.

Chile is one of the countries with long working hours (ECLAC, 2019). Entry and exit times do not coincide with kindergarten schedules, which are usually shorter than what is required for dependent workers. This mismatch makes it difficult for them to get involved in kindergarten activities. Recent studies show the cultural resistance experienced by the labor market to grant leave or adjust working hours to allow fathers to get personally involved in kindergarten activities. These actions usually cause tensions with bosses and affect the work climate and the relationship with coworkers (Montaño, 2018).

The Choice of a Private Kindergarten as an Institution that guarantees Father's Right to get involved in Children Educational Processes

The private administrative dependence of kindergartens is a criterion of choice that takes relevance in the parental discourse. It is suggested that private kindergartens offer a type of education, teaching, and family-school relationship logic that favors greater gender equity in terms of parental involvement in early childhood development processes at and out of educational centers. The interviewees highlighted this opportunity and stated that private kindergartens do promote initiatives to increase their involvement. For the following two professionals, there is an underlying image that public education reproduces segregation in terms of parental involvement according to the gender of the parents.

Well, I also think that we are in a private kindergarten, so it is very different from as it is in kindergartens more..., kindergartens I don't know, you know? (administratively dependent on public educational institutions) (ID1, 36 years old, Ph.D., academic management professional).

Yes, I think that we also choose places with conceptions a bit different (ID2, 38 years old, completed higher education, with a Master's degree, Sociologist).

Fathers want to feel invited to get involved by the kindergarten. Even though it is mentioned that there are various activities in which they can get involved, the participants think that kindergartens do not request the presence of fathers and/or mothers at times compatible with the working hours of the workers, particularly when it has to do with formal meetings organized by the educational centers, such as parent-teacher meetings or personal interviews with the teachers.

Institutional Transparency and Communication as a Regulator of Father Involvement

Among the institutional factors mentioned, the transparency of kindergarten personnel in reporting on the pedagogical processes of the students, accountability for institutional work, and their ability to recognize mistakes stand out in particular. This transparency in management promotes, in the opinion of the participants in this study, greater involvement in the activities organized by the educational institutions. This interest is related to a certain distrust by fathers towards the capacity of the institutions to protect the physical and psychological integrity of their children. As one information technician suggests:

You are not going to give the most important persons of your life to an institution, that if it makes a mistake one day, the child returns with any problem or any damage, or they have an accident you do not know how to react (ID7, 36 years old, Completed higher education, Information Technology).

It is reported that fathers are expected to have the opportunity to know in more detail how the kindergarten works and recognize the institutional quality factors they want for their children's education in terms of infrastructure and teacher preparation, among others. In this regard, it is expected that the establishment and its teaching staff maintain clear, direct, and permanent communication with the caregivers of their students. It is also expected that communication provides information and feedback on the progress or regression of the children. Fathers value when the institution takes the initiative to provide them with information and guidance to orient their actions with the children at home and resolve questions about any topic related to the kindergarten or children's behavior. In other words, fathers should be invited to get involved

effectively in their children's development and learning based on expert information, and not only consider attendance as a duty for families. According to what was stated by a municipal official:

That they communicate well, that they explain to you why you have to participate in the activity (...) that they insist, that they convince you, that they give you solid arguments from a pedagogical point of view, in what you can participate, not only because it is a commitment or an obligation (ID8, 34 years old, completed higher education, Municipal Coordination).

For fathers, these invitation actions are an incentive since, in the paternal discourse, there is a need to be seen, to be invited, and to feel involved in a fundamental task, such as the education of their children. Taking up again what was pointed out by one of the interviewees:

Communication (...) one feels that they also talk to you, one does not feel excluded or not invited but feels that he is part of it (ID3, 44 years old, Completed higher education, with a Master's degree, Industrial Civil Engineer).

The analysis also revealed that the family-educational center relationship establishment practices are not always built on the principles of authenticity and transparency. Some voices criticize the hermeticism of some educational institutions or the lack of self-criticism to recognize mistakes and compensate for deficiencies perceived by fathers, which impacts the motivation to continue getting involved in the meetings made by kindergartens. As one of the interviewees suggests:

It was like there was a degree of secrecy regarding anything, I mean, any mistake they made they hid it, versus the second kindergarten that any mistake they made, they shouted it "hey, we made a mistake," do you understand me?" (ID7, 36 years old, Completed higher education, Information Technology).

In this sense, what was mentioned by the interviewees points to the fact that their communication with the teachers is valued much more than the characteristics of the environment. It is crucial for them that a parameter of trust be established with the kindergarten so that they feel confident about the educational establishment to which they send their children. In this regard, information, opportunities for personal conversation, and good treatment by teachers are considered important resources for building trust. The following quote illustrates this point:

When we left the child, they would take him away from you and turn around. They did not let you say goodbye. They were very tough in their treatment. My son grabbed the bars not to go there, and it was a very nice kindergarten, you know? It was not an ugly kindergarten (ID8, 36 years old, completed higher education, Municipal Coordination).

Finally, the analysis of the emerging categories reveals that fathers expect a professional type of treatment from kindergarten teachers. In Chile, there is an unspoken tendency for teachers to be addressed with the term “tía” (aunt) or “tío” (uncle) instead of using their names. What is interesting about this finding is that it is a naturalized practice that causes rather a rejection in the interviewees since a family characteristic is attributed to a person who is neither legally nor biologically an aunt or uncle. This resistance impels them to insist on calling teachers by their names and encourage their children to do so, as well. In this sense, the interviewees call for a clearer differentiation between the role of teachers and caregivers of children. The kindergarten and the families are supplementary institutions in their educational function but independent of each other. The accounts do not provide further information regarding the effect that this insistence causes on the relationship with the teachers.

The fathers also acknowledge that the growing access to and use of information technologies (which increased substantially in the wake of the confinement as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic) has facilitated communication between teachers and fathers in private early childhood education. Social networks have offered new strategies to facilitate involvement from home and the continuity of children's educational experiences from home. However, those interviewed in this study insist that these communications are not part of the organizational culture but rather respond to the personal convictions and individual initiatives of the teachers.

DISCUSSION

The perception of fathers with children attending a private kindergarten about the conditions that make their involvement in the educational center possible or impossible shows the relevance of cultural, structural, and institutional aspects.

The analysis of the information suggests that gender relations seem to be changing in the new generations of fathers with higher level of education. There is greater value attribution, desire, and willingness to get involved in the educational processes of their children at home and

the educational centers. This new paradigm, however, comes in tension with the demands of the labor market, the type of city development that increases travel time and time compatibility to satisfy different social functions, and the institutional demands of kindergartens. This background supports the results obtained in other countries (Kocygiyt, 2015; McWayne et al., 2019) and challenges social and educational policies to ensure conditions that favor their materialization.

From the institutional point of view, transparency and perceived authenticity regarding the functioning of the educational centers, the dynamics and climate of communication that is built between the educational centers and fathers are part of the dimensions surveyed by the interviewees. The perception that the kindergarten has open doors and is willing to flexibly accept the concerns and information needs are part of the institutional valuations expressed. If the kindergarten meets all the quality characteristics fathers seek for their children, it is reported a greater sense of belonging to and security with the institution; therefore, they tend to increase their attendance in the participation calls made by the kindergarten.

An interesting aspect that emerges from the analysis is the need reported by several participants to have defined institutional regulations that guides the relationship establishment practices between the professionals of the early childhood education centers and the fathers of their students, thus being able to relate with a more understanding and open-to-dialogue environment without gender distinction (Cabrera et al., 2018). All of the above is related to what McWayne et al. (2019) stated regarding the need for the institution to adapt to the reality of fathers and the proposal of activities that fit their time but are also functional within the teaching working hours. To find a middle ground in which both parties agree to work together for the development of the children.

This study worked with a small sample of eight cases, so it is suggested not to consider these results to seek representativeness or generalize for the whole population of Chilean fathers. A qualitative study seeks to deepen the understanding of a social phenomenon and its relationships in a particular group (Hernández et al., 2014). Thus, it is necessary to further deepen the analysis of the perception linked to educational institutions of other administrative units and compare them with those expressed by other educational agents, such as mothers, grandmothers, and teachers, among others. It is also necessary to incorporate a longitudinal view of the problem to have a broader vision of the father involvement process according to the educational cycle, and contrast it with teacher representations in this regard.

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