

Abstract

Collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals are vital for children's development. Daily drop-off moments in preschool provide recurring opportunities to build trust and continuity between home and school, yet these interactions are often brief and fragmented. Guided by theories of cognitive overload and triadic interaction, this study examined how situational demands during morning transitions [are associated with](#) the quality of parent-professional interactions. Between June 2024 and April 2025, 309 parent-child dyads in 62 preschools in [details removed for peer review], were observed during drop-off. Interaction quality was rated across three dimensions—*willingness to interact*, *communication strategies*, and *farewell quality*—while situational demands such as child support needs, group supervision, and organizational tasks were coded. On average, interactions lasted 63 seconds, with only 40 percent including conversations beyond greetings. Professionals showed higher willingness to interact and [higher quality](#) farewells when engaging simultaneously with the parent and child, but intensive child-focused engagement was linked to lower-quality communication with parents. General classroom and organizational demands showed no significant effects. Importantly, interaction quality was highest when multiple professionals shared responsibility. Findings highlight the cognitive and relational complexity of drop-off interactions. Shared professional responsibility appears to buffer competing demands, supporting stronger and more consistent partnerships between families and early childhood settings.

Keywords: [parent-professional interaction](#), [drop-off situations](#), [micro-transitions](#), [preschool-family partnerships](#), [observational study](#)

Introduction

Supportive parent-professional partnerships (PPP) in preschools are crucial for child development (e.g., Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Mautone et al., 2015). Defined as “mutually supportive interaction between families and professionals focused on meeting the needs of children and families” (Summers et al., 2005, p. 66), these partnerships rely on consistent, high-quality interactions that build trust, align expectations, and foster parental involvement (e.g., Intxausti et al., 2013; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). In preschools, parents and professionals typically meet twice daily during childcare transitions, providing unique opportunities for interaction and partnership-building (Traum & Moran, 2016). Despite their importance, little is known about the quality of these interactions at the dyadic level, as most studies rely on self-reported contact frequency, neglecting observed interactional processes (e.g., Murray et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2019). To address this gap, an observational tool capturing verbal and nonverbal aspects of parent-professional interactions during drop-off was developed [and introduced in a previous study, providing evidence of reliability and validity](#) [details removed for peer review]. Using this tool, higher interaction quality during drop-off was found to be associated with greater parental trust, although overall interaction quality was low [details removed for peer review]. This pattern may reflect competing professional demands during drop-off, such as balancing child supervision, emotional support, and organizational tasks (Reedy & McGrath, 2010). Under such conditions, professionals may prioritize attention toward children or the classroom, limiting interaction with parents. Based on this reasoning, the present study examines whether such a trade-off occurs in parent-professional interactions during drop-off, specifically whether relatively more

focus on the child or classroom is associated with less parent engagement. This aligns with multitasking and cognitive overload theories (e.g., Brante, 2009). Conversely, from a triadic interaction theory perspective (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), drop-off moments may also create synergistic dynamics in which professionals' sensitive engagement with children simultaneously strengthens relational quality with parents by fostering trust and continuity between home and preschool. Building on a previously validated observational tool, the present study focuses on conceptual and practical contributions. It examines the conditions under which micro-interactions during drop-off constrain or support PPP and thereby clarifies how trade-off and synergistic dynamics can coexist in brief interactional encounters. Practical implications for early childhood professionals are derived regarding the role of everyday interactions in building trust and sustaining partnerships with parents.

Daily Transitions as Key Moments for Parent-Professional Interactions

Research shows that parents and professionals see daily drop-off and pick-up transitions as the most frequent and accessible opportunities for interaction (e.g., Coelho et al., 2019; Cohen & Anders, 2020; Hachfeld et al., 2016; Viernickel et al., 2013). The informal and recurring nature of these exchanges makes them especially valuable for fostering PPPs. These brief moments allow timely sharing of information about the child—such as emotional state or recent experiences—ensuring continuity between home and preschool (Perlman & Fletcher, 2012; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). Their informality also lowers barriers for families with practical constraints, such as time limitations or language differences (Grady, Ale, & Morris, 2012). Even minimal gestures—eye contact and using the parent's name— can foster a sense of welcome and mutual

respect (Weiss et al., 2014; details removed for peer review). These transitions also give parents insight into the pedagogical environment, fostering reassurance and trust in the setting and staff (Coelho et al., 2019; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). Over time, repeated encounters build a relational foundation for in-depth exchanges, conflict resolution, or broader transitions (McGrath, 2003; Rolfe & Armstrong, 2010). Thus, these brief everyday communications go beyond logistical coordination, fostering inclusive, trusting, and developmentally supportive PPPs. Understanding successful everyday communication benefits from focusing on key features of high-quality interaction. These can include both verbal and nonverbal behaviours—empathy, active listening, questioning, paraphrasing, and warm cues (Gordon, 2003; O’Shea, 2000). Importantly, a verbal conversation is not required for high quality; even brief exchanges can build trust and connection when marked by attentiveness, mutual respect, and genuine engagement.

Current Research on Parent-Professional Contact during Daily Transitions

Research on parent-professional interactions during daily transitions is limited. Most studies focus on the child’s experience, emphasizing professional–child or parent–child relationships rather than parent-professional exchanges (e.g., Menzel, 2021; Brooker, 2010; Klein et al., 2010). Studies that do examine communication during drop-off report its brevity and infrequency. In a Canadian study, Perlman and Fletcher (2012) found that only two-thirds of parents were greeted, with most interactions being nonverbal. Similarly, Endsley and Minish (1991) reported that just two-thirds of transitions involved conversation, averaging just 27 seconds. Complementing these findings, Kusma et al. (2011) observed that professionals spent only about seven minutes per workday communicating with parents—including greetings and parent

evenings—roughly 1.4% of total working time. Other studies, conducted in the USA and Portugal (Maras et al., 2018; Coelho et al., 2019), describe more frequent daily exchanges. Despite their differences, these studies mainly focus on the frequency or scope of communication—such as how often topics like children’s activities are discussed—rather than on the quality or dynamics of interactions. Methodologically, group-level assessments fail to capture individual interactions, and self-reports may be biased (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Mocan, 2007), while standardized observational tools remain scarce. [details removed for peer review] provide a notable exception, using a standardized observational tool to measure drop-off interactions and finding relatively low interaction quality between parents and professionals. Although predictors such as staff resources or qualifications explain only a small part of the variance (details removed for peer review; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012), this points to the need for deeper insight into mechanisms supporting high-quality parent-professional interactions.

The Drop-off Situation as a Multitasking Micro-Context in Preschools

Recent research highlights the complexity of ECEC professionals' work, often characterized by high levels of multitasking and task rotation (e.g., Harrison et al., 2019; Kusma et al., 2011; Courage et al., 2015; Cumming et al., 2024). Multitasking—the simultaneous performance of multiple tasks—is central to daily routines (Appelbaum et al., 2008). Professionals frequently switch between diverse demands within short timeframes. For instance, Harrison et al. (2019) found that professionals engaged in between 3 and 10 activities per hour, averaging 7 activities. Such rapid task rotation is pronounced during "hotspot" periods of intense activity and interruptions, such as the morning drop-off, a critical micro-context with especially high multitasking demands (Kusma et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2024; Cumming et al., 2024). In New

Zealand, Wong et al. (2024) found professionals perform four or more tasks within 20 minutes during this period, requiring rapid task-switching, emotional presence, and attention to children, parents, and colleagues simultaneously. The rapid switching among tasks can lead to cognitive overload and stress, particularly when tasks are complex or non-complementary (Brante, 2009). While prior research has linked multitasking to professionals' well-being, far less is known about how these demands affect interaction quality—especially with parents. Given the drop-off period's importance for building parent relationships, understanding this influence is crucial.

Attention Allocation and Relational Dynamics during Drop-off

The morning drop-off in preschools is a complex micro-context where professionals manage multiple concurrent demands. Drawing on role strain theory (Goode, 1960) and limited capacity models of attention (Kahneman, 1973), they simultaneously act as caregivers, communicators, supervisors, and organizers. These competing demands require rapid prioritization, potentially leading to trade-offs between attending to children, supervising the classroom, completing organizational tasks, and engaging meaningfully with parents.

Drop-off transitions mark the child's daily move from home to the preschool, requiring separation from caregivers and entry into the classroom's relational space (Brooker, 2014). Children often signal needs for reassurance or co-regulation through crying, clinging, or hesitation (Klette & Killén, 2018). Professionals provide structure and emotional support, helping children re-engage and acting as secondary attachment figures that facilitate exploration (e.g., Lipponen & Pursi, 2022; Salonen et al., 2016). Under high demand, attention to parents may decrease, reflecting a trade-off between child support and parent

engagement. Trade-offs can also occur when professionals manage organizational tasks or supervise the broader classroom, limiting their capacity for high-quality parent communication. Research confirms that staff generally interact more with children than with parents during drop-off, illustrating this trade-off (Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). At the same time, professionals appear to strategically invest in brief, high-quality interactions with parents, such as greeting them by name. These actions foster parent engagement and are linked to higher-quality child interactions later in the day (Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). This suggests that professionals manage their attention, prioritizing parent communication in limited windows without compromising child-focused interactions, supporting the “good things come in packages” hypothesis (Scarr et al., 1994).

From a developmental–ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the concept of triadic interaction (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), drop-off moments are co-constructed by child, parent, and professional in dynamically intertwined relationships. Children shape transitions by seeking proximity, initiating contact, or negotiating roles—e.g., delaying separation, bringing transitional objects, or joining conversations (Menzel, 2021). Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) emphasize that even brief micro-transitions are shaped by dynamic interactions among all participants and mirror broader family–institution relationship patterns. Child-initiated behaviours call for sensitive responses and can create space for parent engagement. Professionals’ sensitive interactions with children in parents’ presence reinforce trust, while brief verbal or nonverbal gestures toward parents may strengthen partnership and continuity. Thus, interactions need not compete but can mutually reinforce, highlighting [synergies](#) in parent-professional engagement. In sum, the drop-off moment can be conceptualized as a multitasking micro-context, bringing both competing demands and synergistic

opportunities for triadic interaction, forming the basis for the research questions and hypotheses below.

Research objectives

This study aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of how multiple demands during child drop-off—beyond parent communication—interact with the quality of parent-professional interactions in preschool settings. The research questions and hypotheses are as follows:

RQ1: What specific demands do professionals face during the child drop-off, beyond interacting with parents?

H1: Professionals are expected to encounter multiple demands, including child supervision, emotional support, and organizational tasks.

RQ2: How are these demands related to the quality of parent-professional interactions?

H2a (Trade-off hypothesis): Drawing on role strain and limited attention theories, greater engagement in child-focused tasks, classroom supervision, or organizational duties is expected to correspond with lower parent-professional interaction quality.

H2b (Synergistic hypothesis): Drawing on the triadic interaction perspective, child-focused engagement may enhance parent-professional interaction quality by fostering trust and continuity between home and preschool, as well as creating opportunities for meaningful parent engagement.

RQ3: [How is the involvement of multiple professionals during drop-off associated with situational challenges and quality of parent-professional interactions?](#)

H3: Additional professionals are expected to buffer competing demands, enabling more meaningful parent-professional interactions. [A greater number of professionals](#) is predicted to be positively associated with interaction quality, even under high situational demands.

Method

Design and sample

Data for the present study were collected between June 2024 and April 2025 as part of the [details removed for peer review], which involved 62 preschools, all located in [details removed for peer review]. Preschool managers were first informed about the study and asked to notify their teams, who then communicated the observation process to parents. Professionals provided written informed consent. Parents received written information in multiple languages and were informed that observations would take place; they had the opportunity to arrange alternative classroom attendance on the observation day if they preferred. Interactions with parents and children were observed and rated separately for each dyad. Observations in each preschool covered a total of one hour during the morning drop-off period. Due to variation in parental drop-off patterns, the number of observed families per preschool ranged from 2 to 9, with an average of approximately 5 families per site ($SD = 1.63$). A total of 309 families and 135 professionals across 62 preschools were observed, with 2 professionals per preschool on average ($SD = 0.82$).

Instruments

Quality of Parent-Professional Interaction

To assess the quality of parent-professional-interaction, the standardized observational instrument [details removed for peer review] was used. The observation instrument comprises 13 items across three subscales: professionals' *willingness to communicate and interact* (4 items, e.g., welcoming: from 1 = *no greeting* to 4 = *greeting the parent by name and briefly asking how they feel*), *communication strategies* (5 items, e.g., speaker turns: from 1 = *no speaker changes with the parent (monologue)* to 4 = *frequent*

changes in speaker, with both parties sharing the conversation equally), and *farewell* (4 items, e.g., posture: from 1 = *professional turns away continuously* to 4 = *professional actively approaches parents (distance 50 cm–1 m) and (if applicable) mirrors parents' posture*). Each item is rated on a four-point scale, from 1 = *inadequate quality* to 4 = *excellent quality*, with detailed indicators defining the criteria for each rating level. The instrument focuses exclusively on the interaction behaviour of professionals, as they hold the primary responsibility for fostering cooperation with families. According to its theoretical foundation, the mere occurrence of a conversation is not considered an indicator of interaction quality during the drop-off phase. Therefore, in each drop-off situation, the subscales *willingness to communicate and interact* and *farewell* are always rated. Professionals can still achieve the highest scores on these subscales even if parents show no interest in conversation—such as when they are short on time. In cases where communication beyond greeting and farewell takes place, the *communication strategies* subscale is additionally rated. In addition to these qualitative ratings, the duration of verbal exchanges between parents and professionals was also recorded. Timing began when a verbal interaction occurred that went beyond the initial greeting and ended when the conversation concluded. This measure was intended to capture the actual length of dialogic engagement, independent of its assessed quality. Moreover, the instrument also considered the parent's availability as a contextual factor. Availability was measured by the duration of the parent's physical presence in the drop-off area, timed with a stopwatch from entry to departure, regardless of whether any interaction occurred.

Additional Demands during Child Drop-Off

To examine how additional demands influence parent-professional interactions, an extended version of the [details removed for peer review] also assesses professionals'

behaviour toward children during these moments. Specifically, the instrument includes items that assess the professional's welcoming behaviour toward the newly arriving child (from 1 = *no verbal welcoming* to 4 = *warm and comprehensive welcoming*), the intensity of their interaction with that child (from 1 = *low intensity* to 4 = *high intensity*), and the extent to which the child requires additional support during separation (e.g., emotional reassurance or physical assistance; from 1 = *no support needed* to 4 = *high support needs*). Moreover, the instrument considers situational demands arising from the group of children already present in the classroom, such as supervision needs or ongoing activities requiring attention (from 1 = *no demands* to 4 = *high demands*). It also captures the extent to which professionals are engaged with other parents (from 1 = *no involvement* to 4 = *high involvement*) or involved in organizational tasks. [These organizational tasks include both logistical/administrative \(e.g., preparing breakfast\) and routine pedagogical preparation \(e.g., planning classroom activities\), and are assessed using a checklist of seven predefined organizational activities, along with an open-ended field for recording any additional organizational activities.](#)

Procedure

In each preschool, two observers rated drop-off interactions for a total of 60 minutes. One focused on professional-parent interaction quality, the other on professional-child interactions and additional demands (organizational tasks, classroom management, interactions with other parents). Both observed the same parent-child dyad simultaneously, providing a comprehensive view of the drop-off experience. Observations began when a parent entered the classroom and ended after farewell or departure, repeated continuously for each dyad. A third observer assessed inter-rater

reliability by independently coding interactions in parallel. Parent-professional interactions were double-coded in 5 preschools ($N = 28$ drop-off interactions), child-professional interactions in 9 preschools ($N = 34$ drop-off interactions). Observers completed online training, practice observations, and certification ($\geq 80\%$ agreement with a trainer), with ongoing supervision to ensure data quality.

Statistical analyses

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Inter-rater reliability for the interaction ratings, child-related demands, and organizational activities was assessed using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC, two-way mixed-effects model, single measures, absolute agreement; McGraw & Wong, 1996), showing moderate to good reliability (ICCs = .77–1.00; Leslie & Fleenor, 1998). Descriptive statistics summarized interaction quality, child-related demands, and contextual variables. Independent-samples t-tests compared situations with and without concurrent child interaction or organizational tasks, while Pearson correlations assessed continuous predictors (intensity of professional–child interaction, demands from child group, demands from other parents). Analyses were conducted on three subscales: willingness to communicate and interact, communication strategies, and farewell. Effect sizes (Cohen's d), 95% confidence intervals, and significance levels were reported; Welch's correction was applied where variance homogeneity was violated. To assess whether the presence of multiple professionals moderated associations between situational demands and interaction quality, a one-way ANOVA compared three situational conditions: (a) low-demand (no concurrent child interaction), (b) high-demand (one professional responsible for both child and parent interaction), and (c) shared-responsibility (multiple professionals jointly

involved). Significant omnibus effects were followed by Games–Howell or Tukey HSD post hoc tests, with partial eta squared (η^2) reported.

Results

Descriptives of Parent-Professional Interaction

On average, parents were available for interaction for 63 seconds per situation ($SD = 71$ s), with considerable variation across individual cases ($Min = 2$ s, $Max = 450$ s). In 40.5% of the situations ($N = 125$), a conversation occurred that went beyond a simple greeting or farewell. These brief conversations lasted an average of 53 seconds ($SD = 54$ s, $Min = 2$ s, $Max = 356$ s). [Descriptive statistics of parent-professional interaction are presented in Table 1:](#) Professionals scored on average between *minimal* (2) and *good* (3) on the *communication strategies* and *willingness to communicate and interact* subscales, while the mean score for *farewell* fell below minimal (2) on the scale. Additional descriptive analyses revealed that in 17.2% of cases, parents were not verbally greeted by a professional upon arrival, and in over half of the situations (55.3%), no verbal farewell to the parent was offered during the handover. Bivariate correlations between the duration of parental presence and the quality of parent-professional interactions indicated that longer availability was associated with higher interaction quality. All three dimensions were significantly and positively correlated with presence duration, although effect sizes were small to moderate: willingness to interact and communicate ($r = .28, p = .001$), communication strategies ($r = .28, p = .004$), and farewell ($r = .20, p = .001$). In most interactions (82.5%), only one professional was involved in the exchange with the parent. In the remaining 17.5% of cases, up to three professionals participated.

Descriptives of additional Demands on Professionals during Morning

Transition

The first competing demand on professionals is the need to interact with the child being dropped off. As shown in Table 1, a total of 89.3% of children were greeted, with an average greeting quality score of 2.35 ($SD = 0.72$). In 145 cases (47.2%), the professional initiated an interaction with the child that went beyond a simple greeting. The intensity of these interactions averaged 2.44 ($SD = 0.78$). However, only 9% of the interactions involved an intensive conversation. Children's support needs during drop-off were also generally low: On average, children required little assistance to integrate into the pedagogical setting ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.96$), and they showed relatively low levels of seeking connection with the professional ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.61$).

In terms of further demands: demands from the classroom group were low ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.66$), with few or no demands in 90.4% of cases. Demands arising from other parents, occurring parallel to individual parent-professional interactions, were even lower ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 0.43$). A similar pattern emerged regarding organizational tasks: professionals were only engaged in potentially competing organizational activities in 16.1% of the observed situations ($N = 49$). These were most frequently related to preparing breakfast (48.1%) or tidying the classroom (18.5%). Other tasks included completing documentation (13%), preparing pedagogical activities (11.1%), interacting with colleagues (9.3%), and answering phone calls (1.9%). Observers rated professionals as having sufficient resources for parent interactions in 93.4% of cases, aligning with earlier findings that they were rarely occupied with additional organizational or child-related tasks during drop-off.

Associations and Group Differences in Additional Demands and Parent-Professional Interaction Quality

To examine drop-off dynamics, we assessed whether professionals' interaction quality with parents differed depending on concurrent child-focused interactions and other situational demands. Results of the group comparisons are presented in Table 2, and correlations are summarized in Table 3.

As shown in Table 2, professionals displayed significantly higher levels of *willingness to interact and communicate* with parents in situations where they simultaneously interacted with the child than in those without child interaction. Similarly, parental *farewell* quality was higher in situations involving child interaction compared to those without. In contrast, for the subscale *communication strategies*, professionals scored slightly lower when they were simultaneously interacting with the child compared to when they were not. This difference was not statistically significant. We also analysed whether the intensity of child–professional interaction, as initiated by the professional, was related to the quality of the parent–professional interaction (see Table 3). Results showed a significant negative correlation between interaction intensity and the quality of *communication strategies*, indicating a moderate negative association. This suggests that as professionals engaged more intensively with the child, their capacity to apply high-quality communication strategies in parallel interactions with parents decreased. No significant correlations were found between interaction intensity and *willingness to interact and communicate* or *farewell* quality. Additionally, the quality of the greeting offered to the child showed no significant relationship with any of the three dimensions of parent–professional interaction. Finally, we examined whether child-initiated support needs, such as

seeking proximity to the professional or requiring help integrating into the pedagogical setting, influenced the quality of parent-professional interaction (see Table 3). In terms of support needs of the child, we observed a small but statistically significant positive correlation between the child's need for support in integrating into classroom activities and *farewell quality*. This suggests that in situations where the child had difficulty separating from the parent, professionals tended to offer a more higher-quality farewell. In contrast, the child seeking connection with the professional was not significantly correlated with any interaction dimension, though a non-significant negative trend was observed for communication strategies.

We also examined whether demands from other parents or children already in the classroom were associated with parent-professional interaction quality (see Table 3). No significant associations were found for either source of demand. We further examined whether professionals' engagement in organizational tasks during the drop-off was associated with the quality of their interactions with parents (see Table 2). *No significant group differences were observed for any of the three interaction dimensions. Mean scores were slightly higher for willingness to interact and communicate and for communication strategies when professionals were engaged in organizational tasks, whereas farewell quality remained virtually unchanged; however, none of these differences reached statistical significance.*

Buffering Effects of Multi-Professional Involvement in Parent-Professional Interactions

To examine whether multiple professionals buffer strain from overlapping responsibilities, we compared parent-professional interaction quality across three

drop-off conditions: (1) low-demand—no concurrent child interaction; (2) high-demand—one professional managing both parent and child; and (3) moderate-demand—multiple professionals sharing responsibilities (for results see Table 4). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of group membership on *professionals' willingness to interact and communicate*, $F(2, 303) = 8.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .052$. Means increased across the groups from low- to high-moderate-demand: the lowest willingness was observed in the low-demand condition, slightly higher in the high-demand condition, and highest in the moderate-demand condition. Post-hoc Games–Howell comparisons showed that the moderate-demand condition differed significantly from both the low-demand ($p < .001$) and high-demand ($p = .002$) conditions. A similar pattern emerged for *farewell quality*, $F(2, 302) = 3.96, p = .020, \eta^2 = .026$, with scores increasing from the low-demand to the high-demand to the moderate-demand condition. Tukey HSD post-hoc tests indicated a significant difference between the low- and moderate-demand conditions ($p = .038$). For *communication strategies*, ANOVA results also indicated a significant group effect, $F(2, 122) = 3.99, p = .021, \eta^2 = .061$. Descriptives revealed the lowest scores in the high-demand (one-professional) condition, while both the low-demand and moderate-demand conditions scored higher.

Discussion

This study investigated the dynamics of parent-professional interactions during preschool drop-off. Although previous research shows these interactions are often suboptimal, their quality is crucial for building parental trust (e.g., details removed for peer review). We examined situational demands on professionals, their relation to interaction quality, and whether multiple

professionals support these interactions. [The discussion synthesizes key findings in relation to existing theory and research and clarifies the conditions under which trade-off and synergistic dynamics coexist in drop-off interactions.](#)

The first research question aimed to examine the specific demands professionals face during child drop-off beyond parent interaction. Based on previous studies, it was hypothesized that professionals experience multiple concurrent demands during this transition, such as supervising children and providing them with emotional support, and handling organizational tasks (e.g., Kusma et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2024). Findings showed that overall simultaneous demands were relatively low. Organizational tasks were infrequent, group-child demands minimal, and interactions with other parents rare. Demands from the individual child were somewhat higher but generally moderate: most children received at least a greeting, nearly half experienced interactions beyond a simple greeting, and support needs were low. Professionals were rated as having sufficient resources to engage with parents in over 90% of situations. These results partly contrast prior literature portraying drop-off as a high-pressure multitasking “hotspot” (Kusma et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2024), suggesting strain may be lower during the actual interactional moment. A possible explanation lies in methodological differences: earlier studies often used broader time frames (e.g., time-use diaries), while the present study focused narrowly on the interactional moment. It is plausible that multitasking is more prevalent before or after these interactions but less so during them. Additionally, the relatively low demand levels observed may reflect effective organizational strategies—such as well-planned staffing or spatial design—that buffer professionals from excessive strain during this critical transition.

The second research question examined how concurrent demands relate to parent-professional interaction quality. Two hypotheses were considered: a trade-off hypothesis, suggesting child-related or organizational demands reduce interaction quality, and a synergistic hypothesis, proposing that certain tasks—particularly emotionally attuned child interactions—may enhance relational dynamics with parents. Findings partially supported [both hypotheses](#), reflecting a nuanced relationship between multitasking and interaction quality. Professionals showed greater willingness to interact and higher-quality farewells to parents when also engaging with the child, supporting the synergistic view and the triadic interaction framework (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), in which child-focused engagement can bridge parent relationships. Conversely, more intense child-professional interactions were associated with lower-quality communication strategies with parents: This association was only evident in situations where conversations extended beyond simple greetings and likely reflects the limitations of attention and capacity: when child demands become more intense, professionals may have fewer resources to engage in complex communicative behaviour with parents. This supports the trade-off hypothesis and is consistent with role strain theory (Goode, 1960) and limited attention models (Kahneman, 1973), which argue that increasing demands in one domain reduce available capacity in others. [Overall, these findings extend existing theory by showing that trade-off and synergistic dynamics can coexist within the same interactional context, depending on the type and intensity of demands.](#)

Notably, broader group-child demands, and organizational tasks did not significantly affect parent interaction quality, suggesting that some multitasking is routinized and less cognitively demanding. A positive association between

children's support needs and the farewell-to-parent quality indicates that emotionally rich child interactions can prompt professionals to act more deliberately, benefiting both child and parent engagement. These findings highlight that the impact of multitasking depends on the type and intensity of demands and that under manageable levels, relational engagement with one actor may enhance interactions with another.

The third research question examined whether the involvement of multiple professionals during drop-off is linked to higher-quality parent-professional interactions under varying situational demands. Three settings were compared: (1) low-demand situations without child interaction; (2) high-demand situations, where one professional managed both child and parent; and (3) moderate-demand situations, where responsibilities were shared among multiple professionals. Across all three indicators—willingness to interact, communication strategies, and farewell quality—[situations with multiple professionals](#) (moderate-demand) showed the highest-quality interactions. These differences suggest that team-based involvement helps professionals manage the relational and attentional complexity of drop-off. This benefit seems to extend beyond simply reducing workload: although overall situational demands were low, the presence of multiple professionals still added value by enhancing relevance, focus, and responsiveness of interactions. Low-demand situations, where no child interaction occurred, prompted the lowest ratings for 'willingness to interact'. [This counterintuitive finding may reflect routinization or a lack of relational entry points, suggesting that when no child engagement occurs, professionals may have fewer cues or prompts to initiate meaningful interaction with parents. Importantly, this does not imply that low-demand situations are inherently negative; rather, it highlights that](#)

some situational activity—particularly child interaction—can serve as a trigger for relational readiness, supporting the triadic nature of drop-off where child engagement acts as a bridge into parent engagement. Rather than confirming that fewer tasks foster better relationships, this suggests that some situational activity—particularly child interaction—may promote relational readiness. This again highlights the triadic nature of drop-off, where child engagement can be an entry point into parent engagement. The largest differences between individual parent-professional interactions were observed in communication strategies, which tended to be highest in situations with multiple professionals (moderate-demand). Shared responsibility appears not only to free attention but may also improve the match between the parental concerns and professional roles. In team-based settings, the most suitable professional—often the child’s key caregiver—can participate in the exchange. For example, one professional may greet the parent while another addresses specific concerns. Such coordination likely enhances emotional attunement and informational precision, contributing to higher perceived interaction quality. Extending the relational perspective of the triadic interaction framework (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), the presence of multiple professionals seems to deepen relational dynamics by allowing more flexible, role-aligned engagement. These findings also align with limited capacity models (Kahneman, 1973), suggesting that distributed responsibilities help sustain attentional and emotional availability in dynamic contexts. In summary, multi-professional involvement during drop-off is positively associated with the quality of parent-professional interactions. While high staffing levels may not be necessary to prevent strain, they offer clear relational and communicative benefits, fostering more meaningful and responsive interactions with parents.

Limitations and Further Research

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited, as all participating preschools were part of an evaluation project in [details removed for peer review]. Previous research using the same instrument indicates that structural conditions such as professional–child ratios and classroom organization can affect interaction quality during drop-off (e.g., higher ratios are associated with lower farewell quality, and classroom-based settings with better communication than open-plan settings). These findings suggest that staffing arrangements and institutional norms may shape professionals’ ability to engage with parents. Future studies should therefore replicate and extend these findings in more diverse settings and cultural contexts (e.g., collectivistic vs. individualistic cultures) to enhance external validity. Second, the observational design captured interactions during drop-off on a single morning per setting. This snapshot approach cannot account for daily variations in situational demands. Future research should use longitudinal designs observing multiple consecutive mornings to provide a more comprehensive picture of multitasking demands. Third, the study relied exclusively on observational data focusing on professionals’ behaviour. While this scope is theoretically justified, it limits interpretation because parental behaviour, cultural norms, and time constraints may also influence interaction quality. Combining observations with surveys could yield richer insights, and future research could examine how different parental behaviours shape professional responses without evaluating parents themselves. Fourth, as with all naturalistic observations, the presence of observers may have influenced professionals’ behaviour. Although observations took place during routine activities and without intervention,

professionals may have adjusted their interactions due to being observed. Steps were taken to protect participants' privacy (observers could stop data collection if parents were uncomfortable, participants could move out of the observation area, and no conversation content was recorded). Finally, future research should also examine settings with younger children—where classroom supervision and individual support needs during drop-off are often more intensive—as well as settings with higher proportions of children with special needs. Such studies could reveal distinct patterns of multitasking and interaction quality shaped by developmental differences and diverse support requirements.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings highlight the importance of raising professionals' awareness of the relational value of parent interactions during drop-off. Although situational demands were generally moderate, interaction quality varied, suggesting that engagement depends not only on available capacity but also on professional attitudes, understanding and awareness and team coordination. Professionals should be encouraged and supported to view drop-off exchanges as meaningful pedagogical moments—opportunities to engage families and strengthen relationships. Clear team routines for real-time role coordination can help manage simultaneous demands from children and parents, ensuring smooth collaboration and consistent interaction quality. Integrating such practices into training and team reflection can prepare professionals to contribute effectively to strong family partnerships during transitions. At the policy level, the results underscore the need for structural conditions that support these practices. Having at least two professionals present during drop-off enables flexible, role-appropriate engagement and continuity in family relationships. Staffing and scheduling

policies should therefore consider the relational demands of transitions as a key aspect of pedagogical quality and family partnership.

References

Details removed for peer review

Details removed for peer review

Appelbaum, S. H., Marchionni, A., & Fernandez, A. (2008). The multi-tasking paradox: Perceptions, problems and strategies. *Management Decision*, 46(9), 1313-1325. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740810911966>

Brante, G. (2009). Multitasking and synchronous work: Complexities in teacher work. *Teaching and teacher education*, 25(3), 430-436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.09.015>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard university press.

Brooker, L. (2010). Constructing the triangle of care: Power and professionalism in practitioner/parent relationships. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(2), 181-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071001003752203>

Brooker, L. (2014). Making this my space: Infants' and toddlers' use of resources to make a day care setting their own. In L. J. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and Care: exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research and practice* (pp. 29-42). Springer Netherlands.

Coelho, V., Barros, S., Burchinal, M. R., Cadima, J., Pessanha, M., Pinto, A. I., Peixoto, C. & Bryant, D. M. (2019). Predictors of parent-teacher communication during infant transition to childcare in Portugal. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(13), 2126-2140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1439940>

- Cohen, F. & Anders, Y. (2020). Family involvement in early childhood education and care and its effects on the social-emotional and language skills of 3-year-old children. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 31(1), 125-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2019.1646293>
- Coulthard, M. G. (1985). Maturation of glomerular filtration in preterm and mature babies. *Early human development*, 11(3-4), 281-292. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-3782\(85\)90082-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-3782(85)90082-9)
- Courage, M. L., Bakhtiar, A., Fitzpatrick, C., Kenny, S., & Brandeau, K. (2015). Growing up multitasking: The costs and benefits for cognitive development. *Developmental Review*, 35, 5-41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2014.12.002>
- Cryer, D. & Burchinal, M. (1997). Parents as child care consumers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(1), 35-58. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(97\)90042-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(97)90042-9)
- Cumming, T., Richardson, S., Gibson, M., Crisp, K., Harrison, L., Press, F., & Wong, S. (2024). Investigating multi-tasking and task rotation as aspects of the complexity of early childhood educators' work. *Early Years*, 44(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2022.2086220>
- Degotardi, S. (2010). High-quality interactions with infants: relationships with early-childhood practitioners' interpretations and qualification levels in play and routine contexts. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18(1), 27-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669761003661253>
- Endsley, R. C. & Minish, P. A. (1991). Parent-staff communication in day care centers during morning and afternoon transitions. *Early Childhood*

- Research Quarterly*, 6(2), 119-135. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(91\)90002-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(91)90002-3)
- Galindo, C. & Sheldon, S. B. (2012). School and home connections and children's kindergarten achievement gains: The mediating role of family involvement. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 90-103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.05.004>
- Goode, W. J. (1960). A theory of role strain. *American sociological review*, 483-496. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2092933>
- Gordon, T. (2003). *Teacher effectiveness training*. Three Rivers Press.
- Grady, J. S., Ale, C. M. & Morris, T. L. (2012). A naturalistic observation of social behaviours during preschool drop-off. *Early Child Development and Care*, 182(12), 1683-1694. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2011.649266>
- Hachfeld, A., Anders, Y., Kuger, S. & Smidt, W. (2016). Triggering parental involvement for parents of different language backgrounds: the role of types of partnership activities and preschool characteristics. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186(1), 190-211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1007370>
- Harrison, L. J., Wong, S., Press, F., Gibson, M., & Ryan, S. (2019). Understanding the work of Australian early childhood educators using time-use diary methodology. *Journal of research in childhood education*, 33(4), 521-537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1644404>
- Intxausti, N., Etxeberria, F., & Joaristi, L. (2013). Involvement of immigrant parents in their children's schooling in a bilingual educational context: The Basque case (Spain). *International Journal of Educational Research*, 59, 35-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2013.02.006>

- Kahneman, D. (1973). *Attention and Effort*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.
- Klein, P. S., Kraft, R. R. & Shohet, C. (2010). Behaviour patterns in daily mother-child separations: Possible opportunities for stress reduction. *Early Child Development and Care*, 180(3), 387-396.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430801943290>
- Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018). Painful transitions: a study of 1-year-old toddlers' reactions to separation and reunion with their mothers after 1 month in childcare. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1424150>
- Kusma, B., Mache, S., Quarcoo, D., Nienhaus, A., & Groneberg, D. A. (2011). Educators' working conditions in a day care centre on ownership of a non-profit organization. *Journal of occupational medicine and toxicology*, 6(1), 36.
- Leslie, J. B. & Fleenor, J. W. (1998). *Feedback to managers: A Review and Comparison of Multi-Rater Instruments for Management Development*. Center for Creative Leadership. [https://www.humansynergistics.com/docs/default-source/research-publications/leslie-j-b-amp-fleenor-j-w-\(1998\)-feedback-to-managers-a-review-and-comparison-of-multi-rater-instruments-for-management-development-\(3rd-ed-\)-greensboro-nc-center-for-creative-leadership-lws.pdf](https://www.humansynergistics.com/docs/default-source/research-publications/leslie-j-b-amp-fleenor-j-w-(1998)-feedback-to-managers-a-review-and-comparison-of-multi-rater-instruments-for-management-development-(3rd-ed-)-greensboro-nc-center-for-creative-leadership-lws.pdf)
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lipponen, L., & Pursi, A. (2022). Children's grief: repertoires of practices in institutional early childhood education and care. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 29(3), 215–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2022.2133144>

- Maras, E. Q., Lang, S. N. & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2018). An observational assessment of parent-teacher cocaring relationships in infant-toddler classrooms. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(2), 212-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1442033>
- Mautone, J. A., Marcelle, E., Tresco, K. E. & Power, T. J. (2015). Assessing the quality of parent-teacher relationships for students with ADHD. *Psychology in the Schools*, 52(2), 196–207. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21817>
- McGrath, W. H. (2003). *Ambivalent partners. Relationships between mothers and teachers in a full-time child care center* [Dissertation]. University of Pennsylvania. <https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3087432>
- McGraw, K. O. & Wong, S. P. (1996). Forming Inferences about Some Intraclass Correlation Coefficients. *Psychological Methods*, 1(1), 30-46.
- Menzel, B. (2021). Die Akteurschaft von Kindern in Tür- und Angelgesprächen. Ergebnisse einer ethnographischen Studie im frühpädagogischen Setting. *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung*, 16, 95-111
- Mocan, N. (2007). Can consumers detect lemons? An empirical analysis of information asymmetry in the market for child care. *Journal of Population Economics*, 20(4), 743–780. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-006-0087-6>
- Murray, E., McFarland-Piazza, L. & Harrison, L. J. (2015). Changing patterns of parent-teacher communication and parent involvement from preschool to school. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(7), 1031-1052. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.975223>
- O'Shea, D. J. (2001). *Families and teachers of individuals with disabilities: Collaborative orientations and responsive practices*. Allyn & Bacon.

- Perlman, M. & Fletcher, B. A. (2012). Hellos and how are yous: Predictors and correlates of communication between staff and families during morning drop-off in child care centers. *Early Education & Development, 23*(4), 539-557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2010.548766>
- Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful kindergarten transition*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Reedy, C. K. & McGrath, W. H. (2010). Can you hear me now? Staff-parent communication in child care centres. *Early Child Development and Care, 180*(3), 347-357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430801908418>
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. & Pianta, R. C. (1999). Patterns of family-school contact in preschool and kindergarten. *School Psychology Review, 28*(3), 426-438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.1999.12085975>
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. & Pianta, R. C. (2005). Family-school communication in preschool and kindergarten in the context of a relationship-enhancing intervention. *Early Education & Development, 16*(3), 287-316. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed1603_1
- Rolfe, S. A. & Armstrong, K. J. (2010). Early childhood professionals as a source of social support: The role of parent-professional communication. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 35*(3), 60-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911003500308>
- Salonen, E., Laakso, M. L., & Sevón, E. (2016). Young children in day and night care: negotiating and constructing belonging during daily arrivals. *Early Child Development and Care, 186*(12), 2022–2033. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1146717>

- Scarr, S., Eisenberg, M., & Deater-Deckard, K. (1994). Measurement of quality in child care centers. *Early childhood research quarterly*, 9(2), 131-151.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(94\)90002-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(94)90002-7)
- Summers, J. A., Hoffman, L., Marquis, J., Turnbull, A., Poston, D. & Nelson, L. (2005). Measuring the quality of family-professional partnerships in special education services. *Exceptional Children*, 72(1), 65-81.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290507200104>
- Swartz, M. I. & Easterbrooks, M. A. (2014). The role of parent, provider, and child characteristics in parent-provider relationships in infant and toddler classrooms. *Early Education & Development*, 25(4), 573-598.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.822229>
- Traum, L. C. & Moran, M. J. (2016). Parents' and teachers' reflections on the process of daily transitions in an infant and toddler laboratory school. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 37(4), 331-350.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2016.1241967>
- Viernickel, S., Nentwig-Gesemann, I., Nicolai, K., Schwarz, S. & Zenker, L. (2013). *Schlüssel zu guter Bildung, Erziehung und Betreuung. Bildungsaufgaben, Zeitkontingente und strukturelle Rahmenbedingungen in Kindertageseinrichtungen. Forschungsbericht*. (1. Aufl.) Der Paritätische Gesamtverband.
- Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., Kreider, H. & Chatman-Nelson, C. (2014). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological systems framework* (3. Aufl.). Sage Publications.
- Wong, S., Harrison, L. J., Gibson, M. L., Press, F., Bittman, M., Crisp, K., & Ryan, S. (2024). Measuring early childhood educators' time at work using

an electronic random time-sampling approach. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 47(1), 33-48.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2022.2128102>

Table 1

Descriptives

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Parent-professional interaction				
Willingness to interact and communicate	309	2.22 (0.65)	1.00	4.00
Communication strategies	125	2.53 (0.60)	1.00	3.80
Farewell	308	1.73 (0.70)	1.00	3.75
Additional Demands on Professionals During Morning Transition				
Child-professional interaction				
Welcoming the child	307	2.35 (0.72)	1.00	4.00
Intensity of interaction	145	2.44 (0.78)	1.00	4.00
<i>Support needs of the child</i>				
Getting involved in activities	298	1.69 (0.96)	1.00	4.00
Seeking connection with the professional	296	1.35 (0.61)	1.00	4.00
Further demands				
Demands within the classroom	302	1.48 (0.66)	1.00	4.00
Demands of other parents	305	1.14 (0.43)	1.00	4.00
Organizational tasks				
		Yes (N/%)	No (N/%)	
In general	304	49 / 16.1	255 / 83.9	
Filling out documents	54	7 / 13.0	47 / 87.0	
Preparing breakfast	54	26 / 48.1	28 / 51.9	
Interaction with colleagues	54	5 / 9.3	49 / 90.7	

Preparing activities	54	6 / 11.1	48 / 88.9
Tidying up	54	10 / 18.5	44 / 81.5
Create notices	54	/	54 / 100.0
Taking phone calls	54	1 / 1.9	53 / 98.1

Note. Rating levels: quality of parent-professional interaction: 1 = *inadequate*, 2 = *minimal*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *excellent*; welcoming the child: from 1 = *no welcoming* to 4 = *warm and comprehensive welcoming*; intensity of child-professional interaction: from 1 = *low intensity* to 4 = *high intensity*; support needs of the child: from 1 = *no support needed* to 4 = *high support needs*; further demands: from 1 = *no demands* to 4 = *high demands*.

Table 2

	<i>M (SD)</i> Child Interaction	<i>M (SD)</i> No Child Interaction	<i>t(df)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Willingness to interact	2.34 (0.61)	2.11 (0.68)	3.11 (305)	.002	-0.36	[0.08, 0.37]
Communication strategies	2.46 (0.64)	2.62 (0.53)	1.51 (123)	.134	0.28	[-0.38, 0.05]
Farewell	1.83 (0.72)	1.63 (0.66)	2.46 (304)	.014	-0.28	[0.04, 0.36]
	<i>M (SD)</i> Organizational Tasks	<i>M (SD)</i> No Organizational Tasks				
Willingness to interact	2.24 (0.64)	2.21 (0.65)	0.35 (302)	.728	-0.05	[-0.16, 0.23]
Communication strategies	2.75 (0.64)	2.47 (0.58)	1.82 (121)	.071	-0.48	[-0.02, 0.58]
Farewell	1.70 (0.65)	1.72 (0.70)	-.020 (301)	.835	-0.02	[-0.23, 0.19]

Group Differences in Parent-Professional Interaction Quality

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3

	Willingness to interact	Communication strategies	Farewell
Child-professional interaction			
Welcoming the child	.08	-.03	.09
Intensity of interaction	.04	-.37**	.11
<i>Support needs of the child</i>			
Getting involved in activities	.07	-.09	.13*
Seeking connection with the professional	.05	-.16 [#]	-.02
Further demands			
Demands within the classroom	-.03	-.00	-.00
Demands of other parents	-.02	.00	-.02
<i>Bivariate Correlations</i>			

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

	<i>M (SD)</i> Low Demand	<i>M (SD)</i> Moderate Demand	<i>M (SD)</i> High Demand	<i>F(df)</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>Post-hoc</i>
Willingness to interact	2.11 (0.68)	2.62 (0.43)	2.27 (0.63)	8.28 (2, 303)	< .001	.052	Moderate > Low; High > Low
Communication strategies	2.62 (0.53)	2.73 (0.57)	2.37 (0.64)	3.99 (2, 122)	.021	.061	Moderate = Low > High
Farewell	1.63 (0.66)	1.98 (0.79)	1.79 (0.71)	3.96 (2, 302)	.020	.026	Moderate > Low

Parent-Professional Interaction Quality Across Drop-Off Conditions

Note. Low demand = no concurrent child interaction, moderate demand = multiple professionals sharing responsibilities, and high-demand = one professional managing both parent and child. Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using Games-Howell (Willingness, Communication) or Tukey HSD (Farewell) tests. Only significant comparisons are listed; exact p-values are reported in the text. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.