



University of
Southern
Queensland

**EXPLORING HIGH QUALITY COLLABORATIVE
PARTNERSHIPS IN AUSTRALIAN EARLY
CHILDHOOD SERVICES:
A POSTSTRUCTURAL CASE STUDY**

A Thesis submitted by

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BEd (EC), MLI

for the award of

Doctor of Philosophy

2024

ABSTRACT

Collaborative partnerships between educators and families in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings are proven to provide positive outcomes for children and reflect quality in educational service provision. However, while the significance of these collaborative partnerships has been evidenced, actualisation of collaborative partnerships in practice remains an enigma. Currently, a mismatch exists between policy discourse and field practices, perpetuating a disconnect in expectations and outcomes of collaborative partnerships for stakeholders. Existing research points to the need to better understand how collaborative partnerships are enacted, maintained, and sustained by educators and families. This research study sought to explore how educators and families perceived and experienced successful collaborative partnerships in ECEC settings, rated as Exceeding Australia's National Quality Standards. Three ECEC services participated in a poststructural case study. Data collection included observations of daily routines with educators and family members, followed by semi-structured interviews. Situational Analysis cartographic mapping provided a simultaneous data collection and analysis method that complemented the poststructural research design to reveal the multiple truths of participants. Findings revealed that high-quality collaborative partnerships were positively influenced by educator and family values being strongly aligned with the service philosophy, and that ECEC spaces were a mediating factor in collaborative partnerships. The study's insights extend on existing literature to offer new understandings of how key components and inclusions of collaborative partnerships are enacted in practice and provide further clarity for the ECEC field in terms of translating and actualising research insights into practice. In addition to these ECEC findings, the study offers an innovative methodological contribution through the employment of a poststructural case study approach, the novel application of situational analysis, and extending the application of cartographic mapping.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, Kathryn Louise Mason, declare that the PhD Thesis entitled, *Exploring high quality collaborative partnerships in Australian early childhood: A poststructural case study*, is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes.

This thesis is the work of Kathryn Louise Mason except where otherwise acknowledged, with the majority of the contribution to the papers presented as a Thesis by Publication undertaken by the student. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Date: 9 May 2024

Endorsed by:

Associate Professor Alice Brown
Principal Supervisor

Dr Susan Carter
Associate Supervisor

Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

This thesis comprises of four research papers, developed and written almost entirely by the candidate, Kathryn Louise Mason. The candidate led the design of the study, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and is first author on all manuscripts (Chapter 3, Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 8).

Also contributing to the completion of publications related to this study were the candidate's supervisors, Principal Supervisor Associate Professor Alice Brown, and Associate Supervisor Dr Susan Carter

Paper 1:

Mason, K., Brown, A., & Carter, S. (2023). Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Published Online <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01580-x>

The candidate was the primary author and contributed 80% to the Conceptualisation, literature review, drafting and refining of the final submission; Alice Brown and Susan Carter contributed 10% each to conceptualising, writing, structuring, and editing.

Paper 2:

Mason, K. (2023). Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study. *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education*, Vol 12, Is 2, 1855-1860, Published Online <https://doi.org/10.20533/ijtie.2047.0533.2023.0231>

The candidate was the sole author and contributed 100% to the Conceptualisation, literature review, drafting and refining of the final submission.

Paper 3:

Mason, K., Carter, S., & Brown, A. Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Qualitative Research.

The candidate was the primary author and contributed 80% to the Conceptualisation, literature review, drafting and refining of the final submission; Alice Brown and Susan Carter contributed 10% each to conceptualising, writing, structuring, and editing.

Paper 4:

Mason, K., Brown, A., & Carter, S. Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings [Manuscript submitted for publication]. *Early Childhood Education Journal.*

The candidate was the primary author and contributed 80% to the Conceptualisation, literature review, drafting and refining of the final submission; Alice Brown and Susan Carter contributed 10% each to conceptualising, writing, structuring, and editing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I wish to acknowledge the enduring support and guidance of my doctoral supervisory team, Associate Professor Alice Brown, Dr Susan Carter, in my early days Professor Lindy-Ann Abawi, and towards completion Professor Dorothy Andrews. Your mentorship gave me the strength and tenacity to carry on throughout the years. To you, my most grateful thanks for making this thesis possible.

To those who have offered their academic ear I thank you for your time and efforts in reading chapters and articles, being my sounding board and critical friends. Thank you particularly to Professor Andrew Hickey, Dr India Bryce, and Dr Susan Sharpe for your part in my successes. My DEDU teammates Tom, Krystal and Jodie I couldn't have done it without you!

My exceptional early childhood teams – in my own services and those who participated in this study, you were my motivation! Thank you for the passion you bring to changing young children's lives every day.

To my friends who have cheered me on through every hurdle and celebrated every milestone. I extend my love and thanks to all of you for standing by me these past years. I am grateful for the resilience of our low maintenance friendships. To the Doig, Stower, Brodribb, Sommariva, and Campbell families, thank you!

My family, without whom any of this is possible, deserve the greatest of thanks. To my parents, Therese and Bernie, my brothers and sisters in law, Rob and Naomi, Pete and Winnie, nieces Ellinor, Amelia, Zoe and nephew, Erik; and my in-laws, the Patty Family; I love you all so much. Thank you for the seemingly endless years of your support, love, and hugs.

To my wonderful husband Charles, you have been my rock. Thank you for the endless support, encouragement, celebration, (cooking & cleaning), and all the love I could ever need. You are my forever. Thank you for realising my dream with me.

And most importantly, my darling girl Zara. For you I am so grateful. You are my inspiration. I know that your beautiful smile, intelligent mind, and kind heart will see you succeed in life. I hope that you can be proud of this journey we have been on together. Thank you for being by my side every moment. I love you.

This research has been supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Therese and Bernie Mason.

Thank you for your unwavering support and belief in me.

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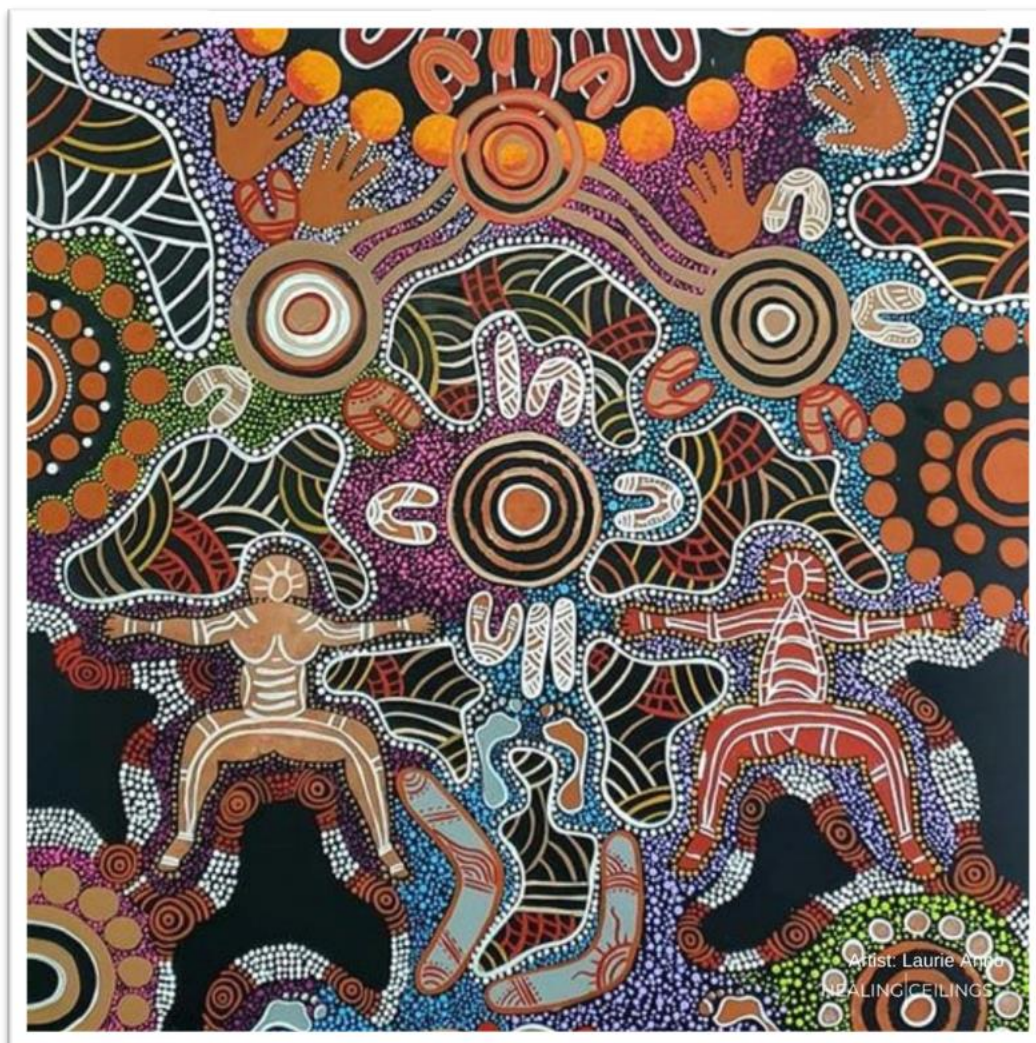
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ABBREVIATIONS

ABTSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority
A & R	Assessment and Rating
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECP	Early Childhood Professional
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
HDR	Higher Degree Research
LDC	Long Day Care
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standard
QA	Quality Area
QIP	Quality Improvement Plan

PROLOGUE – ANNOUNCING ONESELF



Note: Anno, L. (Kalkadoon). (2023). Love, Friendship, Family [Painting].

Australia. Reprinted with permission.

I am not Indigenous, I am Australian. I write this thesis from Meanjin (Brisbane), the homeland of the Turrbal and Jagera peoples. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land and their continued connection to it. I thank them for their care of the land and waterways on which we learn, grow and play. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend kindness as we move together into a brighter future.

Two indigenous authors have influenced my choice to *announce* myself at the outset of this thesis. Lynore Geia and Ali Drummond (both nursing trained academics who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [ABTSI]) discuss the importance of announcing and situating oneself in order to be both open to, nor hindered by, our own positioning, and the positioning of others as we share stories (Drummond, 2020; Geia et al., 2013). Sharing stories, or yarning, is integral and embedded in Indigenous ways of meaning making (Geia et al., 2013). I invite the reader of this thesis to join me in this yarn.

Drummond (2020) writes of Indigenous peoples' *knowledges* as purposefully pluralised to celebrate the multiple and different knowledges existing at any one time. As will be developed in later chapters, this harnessing of multiple truths is an underpinning quest of this thesis. And so, just as Indigenous peoples' ontological belonging is grounded to their country, I wish to ground myself, my positioning, and my ways of knowing (West et al., 2022) throughout these chapters.

Interjections of my researcher voice will be evidenced using Research Memos. These are depicted in blue boxes with an eye graphic, as shown in Figure 1.1. At times these orient discussion from the position of the researcher, while at other times these memos serve to evidence the metacognitive practices of the researcher in various stages of the investigation. Bringing forth my researcher voice as a manner of yarning, these memos highlight contemplations and deliberations encountered throughout this study, as well as offer an opportunity to acknowledge and express my worldview. Researcher memoing (as depicted in Figure 1.1) and the position of the researcher as an active participant in the study are practices aligned with the theoretical underpinnings and research design, a deeper justification of which will be discussed in Chapter 4, Methodology.

Figure 1.1

Researcher Memo



Note. An example of how the researcher memo will be interposed throughout the thesis chapters.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



Researcher Memo

For the past 14 years I have owned and operated two early childhood services, built just 18 kilometres from each other, but they are so vastly different that they could be mistaken as being on opposite sides of the country. I distinctly remember standing in the foyer of the second service (opened 9 years after the first) and watching the interactions between educators and families. Two services, one owner, same foundational philosophy, 18km apart, and the interactions were wildly different. The culture, the conversation, the different feel. This captured my curiosity. I kept replaying the interactions. I began to “tune in” to the happenings at drop off and pick up times at each centre. I witnessed a variety of relationships, conversations and interactions unfold between families and educators across various age groups in the different settings. And so was planted the seed for what blossomed into this investigation.

1.1. Background to the Study

Critical to the success of a child’s development and learning within an early childhood setting are the strong collaborative partnerships that occur between the early learning service and the family. The practices that represent the interactions with families are considered indicators of quality within early childhood services (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020). International perspectives on the collaborative partnerships between educators and families are reflected in educational policies, curriculum, and frameworks from around the world [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development](Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021) reinforcing a global acknowledgement of their value. Yet, while significant reference is made to their importance and benefit, there is still a lack of clarity in the definition of collaborative partnerships (Gross et al., 2019; Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019). A scarcity of role expectations for stakeholders (Kambouri et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021; Phillipson, 2017) has been evidenced as having implications for practices in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field (Mason et al., 2023). In the current study, the focus was particularly oriented around the collaborative partnership experiences of educators and families as the key stakeholders.

International research, including the findings of the Starting Strong report (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021), illuminated the significant importance of collaborative partnerships in education settings. Obscuring the success of collaborative partnerships are tensions across global contexts that include, but are not limited to, the mode and model of ECEC delivery (Boyd & Garvis, 2021), the positioning of the family as a consumer of a service and an active participant within the setting (Almendingen et al., 2021; Fenech et al., 2019), and the capacity and willingness of stakeholders to actively engage (Kahn, 2014; Laletas et al., 2017; Togher & Fenech, 2020). Echoing the findings in international research (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Gross et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020), Australian studies by Rouse and O'Brien (2017), Hadley and Rouse (2018) and Siraj et al. (2019) draw into view, and into question, the ambiguous articulation of collaborative partnership and stakeholder roles within the Australian ECEC framework, the National Quality Framework (NQF) and curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

Utilising a poststructural case study design, this study sought to explore evidence of successful collaborative partnerships between educators and families in ECEC, and the factors that mediated these relationships in order to seek clarity for stakeholders. The study adopted a strengths-based approach to considering these dynamics within ECEC services that consistently demonstrated collaborative partnership practices, evidenced by their *Exceeding* rating against Australia's National Quality Standard (NQS). Three exceeding rated ECEC services will later be detailed as case sites of the case study.

1.1.1. Defining Family

Families hold a pivotal position in a child's ecological system, particularly at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For this study, *family* refers to and will be defined as "a group of interconnected and inter-related individuals operating within a social system" (Rouse, 2012, p. 19). Herein, interpretations of *family* are referred to inclusively as those individuals that are central to the child's ecology (Barnes et al., 2016; Brown, 2019; Phillipson, 2017; Roberts, 2017). Typically living within the same space, or closely engaged with, family includes primary caregivers, parents, carers such as foster and adoptive parents, grandparents, siblings, and significant others.

Research findings by Laletas et al. (2017) and Peck et al. (2015) provided unanimous acknowledgment of the importance of working in partnership with the whole family unit. The impact of successful family engagement on children is significant and long term (Phillipson, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is acknowledged the ECEC service plays an influential role reciprocally for families and communities and contributes to bolstering stronger family units (Wallace et al., 2017).

1.1.2. Family as First Educator

The initial and most instrumental educator in a child's life is their family (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a; Fenech et al., 2019; Rouse, 2012). Unique to the ECEC sector is a divergence from content focused teaching practices to pedagogical approaches grounded in context, relationships, and theoretical understandings of holistic care and education (Askell-Williams & Murray-Harvey, 2015). Practices within ECEC service structures support functionalities such as primary caregiving, routines, relationships and support for families, and the non-learning needs of children. ECEC settings nurture children's holistic growth and development, including social and emotional wellbeing needs.

Family-centred and strengths-based practices in the delivery of ECEC broadly, position families as competent experts, whose role as their child's first educator is celebrated. Throughout this thesis, general references are made to "systems" from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory that discuss the influence of the microsystem (those in the immediate context e.g. parents and educators), mesosystem (the interconnect of microsystems), exosystem (the socioeconomic context), macrosystem (the sociocultural context), and chronosystems (temporal changes over time), and impact of these systems on an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). When viewed through a systems lens, the family microsystem, and their interactions and relationships with others which form the mesosystem, are by proximity the most impactful on the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; McCallum & Price, 2016). The child, the family, and their environment are inseparable when viewed through systems theory (Laletas et al., 2017).

A plethora of research exists on the notions of parent engagement, involvement, participation, and collaboration, where the manifestation of roles, responsibilities, and capacities of educators and families are interwoven (Dunst et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). The experiences of stakeholders within ECEC services do not exist in a vacuum. There are a multitude of interconnecting relationships, pre-existing beliefs and expectations, environmental and contextual considerations that impact on their experiences (Brown, 2019; Gross et al., 2019). Therefore, when considering how families and educators engage in collaborative partnerships, the acknowledgment of the interplay of relationships and systems is essential. Sheridan et al. (2019) calls for future studies to elevate the voice of all stakeholders, particularly highlighting family beliefs and attitudes in the ECEC setting towards a deeper understanding of the contextual impact of these systems on the enactment of collaborative partnerships.

1.1.3. Positioning the Study Within the Australian ECEC Context

The value and effectiveness of family-educator partnerships have been thoroughly explored nationally in Australia (Fenech, 2013; Murphy et al., 2021; Phillips & Fenech, 2023; Siraj et al., 2019; Togher & Fenech, 2020; Zhou & Fenech, 2022) and overseas (Beaumont-Bates, 2017; Bordogna, 2020; Cutshaw et al., 2022; Haines et al., 2022; Kambouri et al., 2021) over the past twenty years. Earlier seminal works that focused on family-based and family centred practices (Douglass & Klerman, 2012; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Rouse, 2012; Tayler, 2006; Trivette & Dunst, 2004) are acknowledged as influencing the formation of Australia's ECEC frameworks and practices of today (Hadley & Rouse, 2019; Rouse, 2012; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Further, Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF) provides a benchmark for all ECEC services under the authority of the Australian Children's

Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). This framework was introduced in 2012 and is comprised of the National Law and Regulations for Children's Services, the National Quality Standard (NQS), the assessment and quality rating process, and national learning frameworks (including Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia [EYLF]).

Of the NQS seven quality areas, Quality Area Six (QA6), Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities (See Figure 1.2), provides two standards and six elements that indicate quality engagement practices between ECEC services and families. This standard makes explicit the notion of shared decision making and acknowledgement of families' expertise whilst outlining the educator's role in provision of information and supporting the family (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012).

Further supporting the recognition of the essential role and positioning of families within the Australian curriculum, the EYLF promotes *Partnerships* as the second of eight underpinning principles, sitting alongside others such as respect for diversity, inclusion and equity, sustainability, critical reflection and more (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a). Valuing of the family's contribution in partnering with educators towards holistic child development is demonstrated in the EYLF as partnerships are "based on the foundations of respecting each other's perspectives, expectations and values, and building on the strength of each other's knowledge and skills" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a, p. 14). Extending joint understandings of each stakeholder's expectations and attitudes, the Partnership principle encourages the building of trust, open communication, shared decision making, and the harnessing of diversity. Interweaving educator and

families' individual values, and the nurturing of interrelationships between these stakeholders directly impacts practices in ECEC (Phillipson, 2017; Rouse, 2012).

Figure 1.2

Quality Area Six of the National Quality Standard

Collaborative partnerships with families and communities		
Standard 6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role.
Element 6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.
Element 6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision-making about their child's learning and wellbeing.
Element 6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.
Standard 6.2	Collaborative partnerships	Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing.
Element 6.2.1	Transitions	Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.
Element 6.2.2	Access and participation	Effective partnerships support children's access, inclusion and participation in the program.
Element 6.2.3	Community engagement	The service builds relationships and engages with its community.

Note: This figure outlines the standards and elements of collaborative partnerships in the NQS. From "Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities" by ACECQA, 2024 (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard/quality-area-6-collaborative-partnership-with-families-and-communities>). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

Within an Australian context, all ECEC services are required to participate in an assessment and rating (A&R) process towards quality improvement. Each state




and territory regulatory authority administers this assessment against the NQS (typically this undertaken by the state's Department of Education). Services are rated from between 'Significant improvement required' to 'Excellent' as seen in Figure 1.3, ACECQA Rating Scale. Following an update to the NQS in 2018, in order to obtain Exceeding and Excellent ratings, the ECEC service must evidence high quality and consistent practices, referred to as the *exceeding themes*, that are embedded into service operations, informed by critical reflection, and shaped by meaningful engagement with families and communities (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). It is important to note that it was not the intention of this study to critique the quality rating process. Rather, this study valued the A&R processes undertaken by ACECQA and sought to investigate the phenomenon of collaborative partnerships through a strengths-based approach, engaging with services already holding Exceeding NQS level ratings.

1.2. Identification of the Research Problem

Recent research has evidenced a disconnect between family and educational professionals' actual and perceived roles and relationships in the early childhood education setting (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). A deconstruction of parental engagement attributes and applications in the early years (Kambouri et al., 2021) has served to strengthen the justification for this study by evidencing numerous components required for successful collaborative partnerships, whilst highlighting a need for increased clarity around roles and responsibilities. Findings of studies by Rouse and O'Brien (2017), and Hadley and Rouse (2018) called for the clarification of language around collaborative partnerships across documentation within Australia's NQF for early childhood. The findings of their research culminated in the proposition that the current ambiguity of key terms fails to clearly articulate for

Figure 1.3

ACECQA Rating Scale

Significant Improvement Required	Working Towards National Quality Standard	Meeting National Quality Standard	Exceeding National Quality Standard	Excellent
Service does not meet one of the seven quality areas or a section of the legislation and there is a significant risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children. The regulatory authority will take immediate action.	Service provides a safe education and care program, but there are one or more areas identified for improvement. 	Service meets the National Quality Standard. Service provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas. 	Service goes beyond the requirements of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas. 	Service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership, and is committed to continually improving. This rating can only be awarded by ACECQA. Services rated Exceeding National Quality Standard in all seven Quality Areas may choose to apply for this rating. 

Note: From “Promote your rating” by ACECQA, 2024 (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/assessment/promote-your-rating>). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority.

educators how to interpret and enact these collaborative partnerships in practice (Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017).

All ECEC services in Australia partake in the A&R process under the NQF. In the first quarter (January to March) of 2021, 35% of services were rated as Exceeding in QA6. Significantly this data revealed practices that were contrary to findings of previous studies (Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017) or

evidenced a marked improvement in practices since these publications. With such a revelation, an opportunity existed to illuminate with transparency examples of successful collaborative partnership practices being evidenced at the exceeding level (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021, 2023). This became the motivation behind the focus of the investigation of this research study, where the goal was to explore interactions and experiences that evidence the ways in which ECPs' and families' practices demonstrated high quality collaborative partnerships within services rated as Exceeding the NQS in QA6.

1.3. Statement of the Research Goals

The overarching intent of this study was to undertake a strengths-based investigation of the phenomenon to elucidate findings valuable to educators and families at all levels. Motivated by this objective, this study sought clarity and a better understanding of high quality and successful collaborative partnership interactions between educators and families, particularly to gain insight into the key components and inclusions of these collaborative partnerships. Three goals supported the aims of the study and informed the subsequent research questions as outlined below.

1.3.1. Goal 1

Advocating for the significance and value of collaborative partnerships and family centred practices within early childhood settings is its prominence in Australia's NQF and associated curriculum (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a). Significantly, much of the existing research in this field has identified that the ambiguities in reference to family-educator interactions within these educational spaces creates opportunities for potential confusion and inconsistent practices. The language used in educational policy documents and frameworks to position families

and educators, shapes the nature of interactions and relationships these stakeholders perceive are required of them to enact collaborative partnerships. Many and varied definitions and models of collaborative partnerships exist, yet a lack of guidance in actualising these in practice remains. It would be of value to understand from stakeholders more deeply, their experiences of positive and successful collaborative partnerships in order to share these insights with the sector and its stakeholders. Therefore, this study sought to: investigate Early Childhood Professional (ECPs) and families' experiences of collaborative partnerships in services rated as Exceeding the NQS in Quality Area 6 (QA6) 'Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities'.

1.3.2. Goal 2

A paucity of observational studies on collaborative partnerships in ECEC services was demonstrated in existing research (Almendingen et al., 2021; Vuorinen, 2020). It is important to examine the relationships between families and educators as they engage in the development and maintenance of high-quality collaborative partnership practices. The quality of these interactions between stakeholders are evidenced as having significant positive outcomes for the child (Beaumont-Bates, 2017; Murphy et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021), yet there is a scarcity of understanding of the means by which collaborative partnerships operate in ECEC. As such, a goal of this study is: to observe and investigate the interactions between ECPs and families (within services rated Exceeding the NQS in QA6) to explore how these evidence and foster quality collaborative partnerships.

1.3.3. Goal 3

Australian research by Rouse and O'Brien (2017) and Hadley and Rouse (2018) brought into focus the authenticity and effectiveness of collaborative partnerships in ECEC services. At the time, the authors highlighted tensions in the discourse of the NQF relating to collaborative partnerships. They proposed ambiguities in NQS and EYLF were problematic for educators attempting to interpret these documents, hindering their attempts at actioning collaborative partnerships in the field. Evidencing improved practices since these findings are the more recent ACECQA assessment and rating results. These results established that 35% of Australian ECEC services were operating at an exceeding level of practice in QA 6 collaborative partnerships with families and communities in 2021 (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021). It is essential to understand how these improved practices were actualised, towards further increasing the capacity of the broader education community in collaborative partnerships. There is an opportunity to harness the learnings from these exceeding services to better understand how they are accomplishing these exemplary level outcomes. Given this, this study sought to: explore the high-quality interactions Early Childhood Professionals (ECPs) and families evidenced within services rated as Exceeding the NQS in Quality Area 6.

1.4. Statement of Research Questions

An overarching intent of this study was to explore educator and family experiences of collaborative partnerships in ECEC settings. The following research questions were developed to support the investigation and identified goals of the project.

1. How do Early Childhood Professionals (ECPs) and families describe their experiences of collaborative partnerships?
2. How do families and Early Childhood Professionals (ECPs) interact in ways that evidence collaborative partnerships?
3. What are the key components and inclusions that reflect high quality practices in collaborative partnerships?

1.5. Importance of the Study

This study was important as it offered an opportunity to bring clarity to understandings and enactments of collaborative partnerships in ECEC settings. Numerous studies (Almendingen et al., 2021; Cutshaw et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2021; Wolf, 2020) discussed the need to decipher the specific mechanisms of how to develop and maintain collaborative partnerships, with others (Murphy et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020) encouraging future studies to harness parent voice more directly and using observational studies (Almendingen et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study considered stakeholders own experiences and descriptions of collaborative partnerships, their value and benefit.

Considering the identified goals and associated research questions, it was fitting to explore this phenomenon within the targeted space of ECEC services that Exceed the NQS in QA6 – Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities. In doing so, a case study design was of value, allowing for nuanced understandings through observations and semi structured interviews. The chosen methodology facilitated the attainment of the research goals and enhanced the depth of findings of the study.

1.6. A Personal Note

I have been an early childhood educator all my life. Long before I even realised it. As one of 30 grandchildren on my mother's side, and as one of the eldest, I was naturally a caretaker for the younger ones. My earliest memories are of nurturing my young cousins, being dubbed the "Pied Piper" by Aunts and Uncles as gaggles of toddlers would trapse around behind me for hours on end.

As life went on, I moved away from home to study a university degree in information technology. However, I quickly came to appreciate that while I had some natural talent in the area, I was gravely lacking in passion for the industry. Being exceptionally unenthused by this I (unsurprisingly) failed my first year of information technology degree. This crossroads was an opportunity to reflect, was the motivation needed to look inward, deeply considering what brought me joy. I enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), and the rest they say is history!

Soon I found my niche and excelled in my studies. Following the completion of my Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) in 2004, I was encouraged by my lecturers to continue into a Masters of Learning Innovation in 2005. Upon graduating I undertook a teaching journey that would identify my beliefs around who I was as an educator, my understanding of the role of an educator and my image of the child. Teaching in a variety of education settings from rural and remote state schools to Grammar schools, and alternative education primary schools provided an incredible diversity of experiences. Engaging in a variety of contracts at a tertiary level offered an inroad to further scholarly work, whilst honing my focus in the early childhood sector with employment in a variety of early years services.

In 2007 I became a mother to a beautiful daughter, and with a vision for early childhood settings to reflect the uniqueness and innate capabilities of children from

birth, I set out to design my first ECEC Service. With my parents' support and a few years of careful planning I opened my first early learning centre in August 2010. As an early childhood educator for the past 20 years, and now the owner and operator of two large early education and care facilities, I have witnessed a variety of family engagement practices over the decades. I have gained an increasing passion for the impact of engaging stakeholders in education settings.

The firsthand experience of operating my own services provided a unique insight into a disparity in how educator-family relationships were enacted across my own two services. I observed in particular the flow on impact of these differences on the quality of collaborative partnerships and the service overall. An example of this was highlighted by an educator at one of my services whose meaningful and noteworthy interactions with a family fostered an ongoing shared relationship that exemplified the intent of the NQS for partnering with families. This served to stimulate my intensive investigation into the nature of this relationship and its impact, catapulting me towards unearthing notions of a shared-support relationship between family and ECP that epitomised the true essence of collaborative partnership practices.

1.7. Thesis Organisation and Publication Overview

This thesis is presented as a thesis by publication. It contains a total of four papers, two of which have been published, and a further two currently under review. These articles drew from and surfaced key learnings that emerged from engaging in this significant research project. Additional chapters act as interconnecting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that link the publications in a cohesive narrative, and include an introduction, literature review, methodology and discussion. The collective thesis encapsulates the journey of the researcher, the participants, and the data itself to

culminate in an expression of lived experiences, interpretations and insights of collaborative partnerships and associated exemplary practices.

1.7.1. Thesis Structure

Chapter One introduced the study, detailed the aims, methodology, research problem, explained the scope of the study and finally concluded with an overview of the thesis structure. Chapter Two explores the current literature. Firstly, exploring broadly the concept of collaborative partnerships. Synthesising findings from previous research relevant to this study, the chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review and evidence of opportunities for further research.

Chapter Three presents the first published article of the thesis, entitled “Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor”. Detailing a review of collaborative partnership literature, this publication surfaces the shifting rhetoric in educator and family roles in ECEC partnerships. The use of metaphor is offered as a tool by which to conceptualise, decipher and present literature as well as for its usefulness in sense-making processes at the theory/practice level.

Research design and methodology is explored in Chapter Four. It begins by outlining the poststructural research design, case study method and further research design details. Chapter Five presents the second published article of the thesis, entitled “Utilising Situational Analysis to Understand Educator-Family Collaborative Partnerships in a Poststructural Case Study”. The paper details the process of completing data collection and analysis using Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2003). Additionally, Chapter Six is the third article of this thesis, submitted for publication entitled “Evidencing Metacognition to Enhance Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research”. Offering a novel technique, this paper presents the conceptualisation of

Meta-JMM to evidence the interweaving of a theoretical alignment with research design and metacognitive processes to enhance trustworthiness.

A discussion of insights from the data and findings of the study culminates in Chapter Seven. Presenting the fourth article of this thesis, Chapter Eight explores the findings in relation to the three research questions. The submitted article “Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings” offers clarity for stakeholders in ECEC around actualisation of collaborative partnerships in practice. The paper translates research findings and insights into practices that foster the development and maintenance of collaborative partnerships between educators and families.

Concluding this thesis is Chapter Nine offering the importance of the study, significant contributions, and providing for further recommendations. Possible directions for future research are then presented before a summary of the chapter.

1.7.2. Publication Overview

Undertaking of this research project led to four papers for publication. These papers addressed a variety of topics that emerged from the literature review, the process of embarking on the research, and the findings. Table 1.1 Publication Overview provides details on each of these publications and where these are located within the thesis.

Table 1.1

Publication Overview

Chapter	Article Title	Focus	Authorship
3	Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor	Literature Review of international positioning of collaborative partnerships in education	Katy Mason 80% Alice Brown 10% Susan Carter 10%

5	“Utilising Situational Analysis to Understand Educator-Family Collaborative Partnerships in a Poststructural Case Study”	The process of utilising Situational Analysis methods within a poststructural case study	Katy Mason 100%
6	Evidencing Metacognition to Enhance Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research”.	The development of a novel technique to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research design	Katy Mason 80% Alice Brown 10% Susan Carter 10%
8	Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings	The presentation of findings from the research, providing a guide for educators and families.	Katy Mason 80% Alice Brown 10% Susan Carter 10%

1.8. Summary of the Chapter

The first chapter of this thesis set the scene by providing a background on the importance of collaborative partnerships and family centred practices in ECEC settings. This was followed by the outlining of concerns around how collaborative partnerships are detailed in Australia’s early childhood framework, the NQF (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023) and EYLF curricula (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a), and how such partnerships are enacted in practice. Motivation for the study was shared, followed by the identification of the goals that would support the investigation of the phenomenon. Identifying the research questions for the study followed. A rationale provided for the research design and methodology in relation to the intended course of action. Finally, the chapter captured the importance of the study in terms of its intended contribution to the field and addressing the area of concern, and the personal significance of the study for the researcher. The chapter concluded with a brief description of how the thesis is organised.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter draws upon extensive literature to frame the context of the research topic which is focused on family and education professionals' collaborative partnership practices in early childhood. In exploring a range of literature, familiarity and understanding of a wide range of past and current research is established, as it relates to family centred practices and family-educator engagement. Specifically, this chapter identifies, evaluates, and synthesises the relevant literature, including illuminating the current mismatch between policy discourse and field practices.

Composed of several sections, this literature review begins with an extensive overview of the nature of collaborative partnerships, that informs a working definition of this term. Consideration is given and attention drawn to the diversity of research related to collaborative partnerships, with common themes exposed for discussion. Following these insights, the value of effective and productive collaborative partnerships in educational settings is outlined, with a narrowing of focus then towards Australian early childhood settings. This is followed by considerations of the role, perspective, and voice of each of the family and the educator in collaborative partnerships being illuminated. The chapter concludes with a summary of existing collaborative partnership models and highlights opportunities for future research.

2.1. Interdisciplinary Understandings of Collaborative Partnerships

A broad review of collaborative partnerships literature and associated literature spans a multitude of industries and sectors including medical and health care, business, tourism, government, law enforcement, and education. Within the literature various terms are utilised in reference to broad collaborative partnership arrangements and include alliance, coalition, forum, task force, joint venture, and merger (Akhtar et al., 2019; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Stone, 2015). At the core of

this literature, the undertaking of *collaborative partnerships* centres around improvement processes, whereby the engagement of stakeholders towards a common goal seeks improved outcomes, growth, and quality (Choi & Choi, 2012; Gray, 1989; Stone, 2015).

Akhtar et al. (2019) discussed relationship innovations such as ‘collaborative partnerships’ as encompassing under one banner the central endeavour to problem solve. Increasingly, collaborative partnerships are championed as a powerful strategy by which to achieve more as a collective than is possible alone (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Stone, 2015). Collaboration requires working together (Choi & Choi, 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2007; Provan et al., 2005) to create supportive environments that meet the needs, wants and interests of all stakeholders (Choi & Choi, 2012; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000), whilst building capacity towards improved quality (Provan & Kenis, 2007; Provan et al., 2005; Stone, 2015). The definition of collaborative partnerships adopted in this thesis is provided by Mason et al. (2023) who stated collaborative partnerships are “the connection of stakeholders who endeavour to work collectively to improve outcomes of a common goal” (para. 7).

The aim of collaborative partnerships is to develop value-based and sustainable relationship processes that build commitment, satisfaction, communication, and trust amongst stakeholders for the purpose of shared outcomes (Akhtar et al., 2019; Baumber et al., 2020; Heffernan & Poole, 2004, 2005). Baumber et al. (2020) outlines the need for clear ways of working, openness between participants with no predetermined outcomes, as well as a recognition of roles in contribution towards these outcomes. Requiring a purposeful progression towards their common goal, stakeholders must invest time in working together, whilst being attuned to each other’s contributions (Ouyang et al., 2020). Bordogna (2020) adds

that these contributions by stakeholders are not necessarily equal, nor that one party ranks higher than another. The value of the collective contributions sustains momentum towards the common goal.

Findings from across business, tourism, law enforcement and education sectors, suggest that the success of collaborations is in some part credited to key personal attributes of stakeholders. These attributes include the valuing of collective insights through participant's individual knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Burkardt & Thomas, 2022) together with their willingness, open-minded and persistent approach to the task (Hartman, 2018). The art of skillful listening, conflict management, and harnessing prior life experience (Hartman, 2018) aid a stakeholder's ability to build and maintain trust (Akhtar et al., 2019; Bordogna, 2020; Burkardt & Thomas, 2022; Hartman, 2018). It is important to acknowledge these microfoundations: personal attributes in oneself and in others, in order to form and to maintain successful collaborative relationships.

Microfoundations to collaborative partnerships are valuable to examine as the human factors (such as emotion and resilience) at a microsystem level are evidenced as impacting the macrosystem level outcomes of the collective (Liu et al., 2017). Possessing an understanding of behavioural and cognitive factors, and their nuanced impacts on social interactions, gives insight into the manner in which stakeholders approach collaborative partnerships. Exploring the strengths and limitations of stakeholders microfoundations and attributes at the microsystem level, has the potential to positively impact the mechanisms of the collaborative partnership. As a result, at the macro-level, the product of the collaborative partnership is therefore more likely to be successful (Liu et al., 2017)

Promoted consistently throughout the literature is an emphasis on mutual learning between stakeholders in collaborative partnerships. Through a transparent means of scrutinising decision-making processes, together with ongoing and deliberate reflexive practices, stakeholders collaboratively develop new meaning and knowledge (Baumber et al., 2020; Polk & Knutsson, 2008). “Identifying and integrating diverse values, priorities, worldviews, expertise and knowledge” (Polk, 2015, p. 114) provides unambiguous insight into the ‘self’ and ‘others’ in collaborative partnerships.

Cultural humility is increasingly reflected in collaborative partnership arrangements (Rossetti et al., 2018) as stakeholders “overcome the natural tendency to view one’s own beliefs, values, and worldview as superior, and instead be open to the believes values and worldview [of others]” (Hook et al., 2013, p. 354). The ability to acknowledge another’s positioning sensitively and respectfully, as well as one’s own, increases mutual learning and fortifies the capacity building nature of the collaborative partnership.

Context dependent barriers to collaborative partnerships are reduced through the process of gaining awareness, harnessing the strengths of multiple nuanced perspectives (Haines et al., 2022; Hannon & O’Donnell, 2021; Rossetti et al., 2018; West et al., 2022). Burkardt and Thomas (2022) found the diversity of viewpoints that contribute to decision making made for more durable outcomes. For example, policies that were implemented and actioned by a stakeholder involved in developing it, made the policy meaningful and therefore it was taken up more successfully. The ability of stakeholders to have and share differing or opposing viewpoints (Akhtar et al., 2019) provides a strong foundation to collaborative partnerships. Embracing these differences and realising the collective capacity of the collaborative partnership

(Choi & Choi, 2012; Stone, 2015) offers long term sustainable outcomes towards the collective goal (Baumber et al., 2020; Burkardt & Thomas, 2022).

The identified foundational skills and a readiness to collaborate, together with the microfoundations and personal attributes culminate at a nexus of power and trust in collaborative partnerships. In this study power is viewed through a Foucauldian lens, where power is not linear nor oversimplified as dominance, but as power that relies on, and is shaped by, knowledge (Foucault, 2005). Fenech and Sumsion (2007) describe power as “fluid and multidirectional, local and unstable” (p. 111). Actions and perceptions of people are shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1980; Mohammed et al., 2015). Whilst some collaborative partnership authors state a balance of power is necessary to the success of a shared perspective (Burkardt & Thomas, 2022), others including Mason et al. (2023), have considered opportunities where a power imbalance should be celebrated (see publication in Chapter 3). Harnessing a perceived power imbalance could be reimaged as a capacity building opportunity that contributes to the growth and direction of the shared goal, and for the stakeholders themselves.

Underpinning the significant body of interdisciplinary research on successful collaborative partnerships is the notion that trust is a central and essential component. Described by Fukuyama (1995) as the “social glue” (as cited in Atkinson and Butcher, 2003, p. 282) in collaborative partnerships, trust is the one rudimentary element that has the ability to overcome coercive or manipulative powers that hinder collaborative partnerships. Alternatively, trust can be considered an ultimate factor that facilitates positive cooperation and successful partnerships (Akhtar et al., 2019). Bryk and Schneider (2003) found relational trust in education settings was embedded in relationships, grew from stakeholder engagements and joint

accomplishments. Existing research from across these diverse sectors calls for further conceptualisation of collaborative partnership terms, clarity in pedagogies of partnerships (Baumber et al., 2020), and further empirical attention on the phenomenon of trusting relationships (Atkinson & Butcher, 2003).

2.2. Valuing Collaborative Partnerships in Quality Early Childhood

In the field of education, quality and collaborative partnerships are considered intertwined in a journey towards improved positive outcomes for children (Beaumont-Bates, 2017; Hartman, 2018). The value and effectiveness of family-educator relationships for the children, families, educators, and services is widely documented (Alasuutari, 2010; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). This includes research that reinforces that a strong alignment and mutuality between stakeholders operating in close proximity to the child's microenvironment has significant positive outcomes for children (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Others, like Murphy et al. (2021), credit a holistic trajectory for the child as stemming from educators having positive partnerships with families. This extends to include children's positive academic outcomes (Van Voorhis et al., 2013), and improved social emotional wellbeing (Barnes et al., 2016; Fenech, 2013; Fenech et al., 2019; Lang et al., 2016). Fantuzzo et al. (2000) add to this conversation pointing to fewer behavioural issues being correlated with increased parental involvement in ECEC settings.

Throughout the literature, consensus is reached on the importance and benefits of successful collaborative partnerships (Kambouri et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Yet, there remains limited evidence of how these partnerships are facilitated, and through what mechanisms they are actualised in practice (Alasuutari, 2010; Cutshaw et al.,

2022; Kambouri et al., 2021). An expanse of definitions, models, and interpretations on the topic has led to varying manners of enacting collaborative partnerships (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Gross et al., 2019). The ambiguous nature of this is evidenced in the gap between the intention of collaborative partnerships between families and educators in educational policies and frameworks, and their application in field practices (Hadley & Rouse, 2018).

Historical, economic, and socio-cultural contexts have influenced dominant policy discourse, with international researching having evidenced its impact on the learning environment (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). As a result, early childhood curricula and frameworks from around the world are reflecting a progression from professional-centred models, towards family centred approaches to collaboration. The emphasis on partnerships in educational reform evidences shifts in contemporary approaches to education, varying family and working dynamics, and the diversity of governance structures in education settings (Alasuutari, 2010). A changing landscape in the provision of ECEC has seen parents become customers in a marketised approach to education (Markström & Simonsson, 2017), shifting the delivery of care and education to a tradable commodity rather than for the greater good (Fenech et al., 2019).

Showcasing opportunities for advancement, existing research calls for enhanced understandings around collaborative partnerships in practice in ECEC (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Siraj et al., 2019). This includes studies by Cutshaw et al. (2022) and Kambouri et al. (2021), who have recently contributed positively towards such clarity by examining the characteristics of collaborative partnerships in ECEC towards supporting educators, families, and bureaucrats. As a result, they and others specific to ECEC call for future partnership models to reflect the unique diversities of

the sector and its stakeholders (Kambouri et al., 2021). Coelho et al. (2018) recommended further studies in ECEC consider interactions between families and educators at peak drop off and pick up transition times, with Almendingen et al. (2021) and Vuorinen (2020) urging researchers to utilise observational techniques. Numerous authors (Kambouri et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020) advocate for future studies to promote the voice of all stakeholders and their experiences of collaborative partnerships in ECEC.

2.3. An Overview of Collaborative Partnerships Components in Education

The development of functional and successful collaborative partnership relationships in ECEC requires an ongoing process of refocusing, revitalisation, and reflection, both individually and collectively by stakeholders (Vuorinen, 2020). Collaborative partnerships are a unique balancing act between knowledge, skills, personal attributes and power relations (Vuorinen, 2020). Numerous authors have contributed to an extensive list of components that create a foundation for success in collaborative partnerships in education settings. The components include but are not limited to those listed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Components of Collaborative Partnerships in Existing Research

Component	Literature by
A commitment by both parties, family, and educator, to actively and consistently engage in the collaborative partnership	Kambouri et al. (2021); Vuorinen (2020)
Where willingness is matched with the availability of their time	Dunlap and Fox (2007); Vuorinen (2020)
Respect	Douglass and Klerman (2012); Dunlap and Fox (2007); Laletas et al. (2018)

Communication Beaumont-Bates (2017); Coelho et al. (2018); Kambouri et al. (2021)

Component	Literature by
Safe and conducive environment in which to collaborate	Kambouri et al. (2021)
Trust	Beaumont-Bates (2017); Cottle and Alexander (2014); Douglass and Klerman (2012); Dunlap and Fox (2007); Gross et al. (2019); (MacNaughton, 2011); Phillipson (2017); (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017); Vuorinen (2020)
Empowerment	Laletas et al. (2017); Rouse (2012)
Shared purpose, goals and decision making.	Beaumont-Bates (2017); Cottle and Alexander (2014); Laletas et al. (2018); Rouse and O'Brien (2017)
A balance of power	Vuorinen (2020),
Reciprocity	MacNaughton (2011); Phillipson (2017); Rouse and O'Brien (2017)
The absence of rivalry bringing together stakeholder's expert knowledge of the child without the need to be authoritarian	Beaumont-Bates (2017) Dunlap and Fox (2007); Owen et al. (2000)
Moving beyond the rhetoric of information sharing in help seeker and help giver roles.	Dunst et al. (2019); Hadley and Rouse (2018)
The recognition of the unique contribution of each stakeholder, and sensitivity to their individual perspective that gives greater strength to the outcomes of the relationship	Beaumont-Bates (2017).
Limiting preconceived notions of 'others', assumptions and bias that would otherwise hinder attempts at collaborative partnerships	Vuorinen (2020).

This list of components in Table 2.1 are the central tenets that form an underpinning for ongoing discussions regarding collaborative partnership practices in

early childhood education settings. Later, these components will support further discussion regarding existing models of collaborative partnership, as well as literature that details educator and family perspectives and experiences of these relationships and interactions.

2.4. Positioning Collaborative Partnerships and Quality in International Research

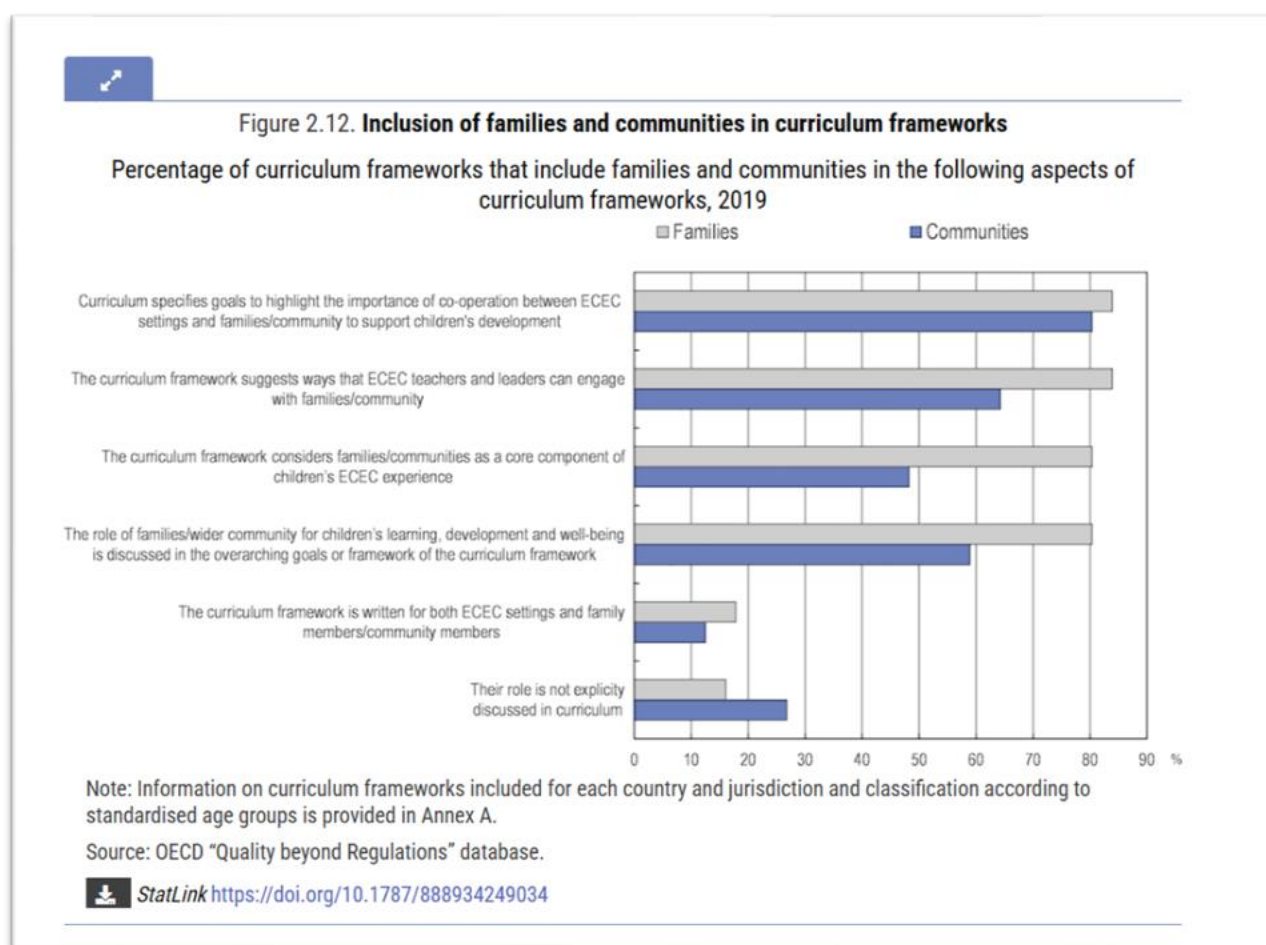
Global education practices evidence the inherent association between successful collaborative partnerships and quality standards in early childhood education and care (Boyd & Garvis, 2021). With a return on investment evidenced as extending far beyond early childhood, children's participation in high quality ECEC services is becoming increasingly imperative (Petrovic et al., 2019). To contextualise this, consideration is given to international perspectives on the positioning of early childhood education and care priorities. The Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review: Quality Beyond Regulations project conducted by the OECD investigated more than 120 ECEC settings utilising 56 different curriculum frameworks in 26 countries (OECD, 2021). Overwhelmingly, the sheer number and diversity of curricula evidences the abundance of approaches to ECEC worldwide and the complexities in comparing them (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021).

Numerous themes emerged in the synthesis report 'Starting Strong VI' published following the Quality Beyond Regulations project (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). This report is significant to the global ECEC community as it illuminates the value each country places on collaborative partnerships between families and educators. Additionally, the importance of family involvement in education settings consistently underscores international debates around quality. Figure 2.1 Families in Global Curricula is the

prevalence of early childhood frameworks around the world that recognise parental engagement as a driver towards quality. These curricula are an important tool in guiding teachers and families through opportunities by which to engage and cooperate.

Figure 2.1

Families in Global Curricula



Note: From: OECD. (2021). *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing. Paris (<https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en>). Copyright 2021 by OECD.

Further evidenced in Appendix A is a table International Early Childhood Curriculum Frameworks and Parent Engagement Goals, a non-exhaustive list of countries, their curriculum frameworks and reference to cooperation with families within the ECEC setting for additional information.

Across the worldwide array of curricula and frameworks guiding practices in early childhood education and care, significant variances are evidenced in how family engagement is discussed. The values and beliefs of each country are articulated through the underlying pedagogical and policy approaches. Many acknowledge the fundamental role of families as first educators (Ireland & Australia), with most acknowledging the impact of broader contextual influences of their political histories and economies, legislations and communities on the child, the family and the ECEC setting (Hujala et al., 2009).

Each region's curricula outline the expectation on their ECEC services to collaborate (Luxembourg), cooperate (Switzerland, Portugal, Estonia & Canada), interact (Alberta & British Columbia in Canada), and partner (Ireland, Finland & Australia) with families. Interestingly, some frameworks do not definitively mention engagement with families, including the UK (England) and the 3–5-year-old curricula for Belgium, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan (Canada) and Israel. Worthy of emphasis here is the expectation that these curricula and frameworks act as a guide for ECEC services to engage families, and that the onus and responsibility to do so is on the service. Only 19% of OECD countries' curricula are written for families (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). The explicit detailing of the role and accountabilities of the family in the ECEC setting is absent. Given significant research suggesting that collaborative partnerships with families are poorly executed in practice (Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017), there is opportunity here for curriculum and framework reforms to include guides that align expectations and actions for families and ECPs roles in collaborative partnerships in ECEC services. To better understand the capabilities of collaborative partnerships, observations, and

investigations of interactions that evidence and foster such relationships would be of value in this space.

2.5. Australia's National Quality Framework Positioning of Collaborative Partnerships

Australia's NQF champions the collaborative partnerships between stakeholders as one of the seven quality areas in the NQS. The culmination of a whole of Government approach to improving outcomes for Australia's children resulted in the Council of Australian Governments[COAG] commissioning and adopting a national approach to Early Childhood in 2009. The National Partnership Agreement on the Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (COAG, 2009) was signed by all States and Territories and the Commonwealth. This initiative saw the development of the NQF which is comprised, as shown in Figure 2.2, of: the National Law and Regulations, the NQS, Approved learning frameworks –EYLF, and the A & R process.

Figure 2.2

Australia's National Quality Framework



A brief overview of each of these sections of the NQF will now be discussed, with consideration given to the manner in which educators and families are referenced. It is of particular value to understand the wrap-around nature of the NQF for future discussion in this literature review regarding the impact of the language referring to, and positioning of, stakeholders within these documents when considering high quality collaborative partnerships within the Australian context.

2.5.1. National Law and Regulations

The Education and Care National Services Law Act (2010) and the Education and Care National Regulations (2011) set the legal parameters and standards for operation of early childhood education and care services across Australia. There were jurisdiction-specific provisions that allowed for state and territory transitional arrangements to take place until full implementation in 2020. Parents, guardians, caregivers, and families are referenced throughout the Children's Services National Regulations (2011) across 20 of the regulations. Table 2.2 highlights the onus of the regulation being placed on either the ECEC service or the parent.

Table 2.2

Children's Services National Regulations (2011) Reference to Stakeholders

Regulation #	Terminology	Required of Parent or ECEC Service
74	Documentation readily understandable for family	ECEC
75	Information accessible to parents	ECEC
76	Provide information upon request	ECEC
80	Menu accessible to parents	ECEC
86	Notify parents	ECEC
88	Notify Parents	ECEC
90	Parent to provide medical management plan	Family
	Consult with family to minimize risk	ECEC
	Notify family of allergens	ECEC
	Parent to communicate changes	Family
91	Medical policy provided to family	ECEC

Regulation #	Terminology	Required of Parent or ECEC Service
93	Notify Parents	ECEC
94	Exemption of parent	ECEC
98	Required to contact	ECEC
102	Authorisation given by parent	Family
111	Consultation with family	ECEC
157	Allow or not prevent access to family	ECEC
172	Notify family	ECEC
177	Make available on request to family	ECEC
181	Provide access to records	ECEC
184	Family to consent	Family
185	Accessible to parents	ECEC

Briefly demonstrated here is the notion that throughout the regulations, ECEC services are required to consult with, make available or provide access to information for families, as is the example in Figure 2.3 demonstrating Regulation 75.

Figure 2.3

Regulation 75 Information About Educational Program

75 Information about educational program to be kept available

The approved provider of an education and care service must ensure that—

- (a) information about the contents and operation of the educational program for the service is displayed at the education and care service premises at a place accessible to parents of children being educated and cared for by the service; and
- (b) a copy of the educational program is available at the following places for inspection on request—
 - (i) in the case of a centre-based service, at the education and care service premises;
 - (ii) in the case of a family day care service, at each family day care residence or family day care venue.

Note—

A compliance direction may be issued for failure to comply with this regulation.

Note: Regulation 75 of the Education and Care Children's Services National Law (Queensland) Act 2011, by Queensland Parliamentary Counsel, 2024, <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2011-038>. Copyright 2024 by The State of Queensland.

On the other hand, it is an expectation that families' obligations through the Regulations are to communicate with and provide authorisation and consent to services, Figure 2.4 Regulation 92 Medication Record, subsection (3) (2) demonstrates this expectation on families.

Figure 2.4

Regulation 92 Medication Record

92 Medication record

- (1) The approved provider of an education and care service must ensure that a medication record is kept that includes the details set out in subregulation (3) for each child to whom medication is or is to be administered by the service.
- (2) A family day care educator must keep a medication record that includes the details set out in subregulation (3) for each child being educated and cared for by the educator as part of a family day care service to whom medication is or is to be administered.
- (3) The details to be recorded are—
 - (a) the name of the child;
 - (b) the authorisation to administer medication (including, if applicable, self-administration), signed by a parent or a person named in the child's enrolment record as authorised to consent to administration of medication;
 - (c) the name of the medication to be administered;
 - (d) the time and date the medication was last administered;
 - (e) the time and date, or the circumstances under which, the medication should be next administered;
 - (f) the dosage of the medication to be administered;
 - (g) the manner in which the medication is to be administered;
 - (h) if the medication is administered to the child—
 - (i) the dosage that was administered; and
 - (ii) the manner in which the medication was administered; and
 - (iii) the time and date the medication was administered; and
 - (iv) the name and signature of the person who administered the medication; and
 - (v) if another person is required under regulation 95 to check the dosage and administration, the name and signature of that person.

Note: Regulation 92 of the Education and Care Children's Services National Law (Queensland) Act 2011, by Queensland Parliamentary Counsel, 2024, <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2011-038>. Copyright 2024 by The State of Queensland

Respecting the litigious nature of the Regulations it remains noteworthy that the tone and intent of the relationship between ECEC Service and family here is one of giver and receiver of information.

2.5.2. The National Quality Standard (NQS)

The NQS is a national benchmark of seven quality areas that identify important outcomes for children (see Figure 2.5). These standards guide the delivery of ECEC and are the tool by which educators plan and facilitate interactions with families and children. Comprised of standards and elements, the seven quality areas were reviewed in 2018 following feedback from the sector around overlap. This amendment saw a reduction in standards from 18 to 15, and from 58 to 40 elements.

The language and intent of each standard and element were clarified, with the changes ensuring duplication was minimized. These changes were made with the intent of further supporting services in successfully applying the standards and elements in practice.

Figure 2.5

The Seven Quality Areas of the NQS



Note. Seven Quality Areas, by ACECQA, 2024, (https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-03/QAPosters_NQS_0.pdf). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

Families are mentioned throughout the NQS, specifically in Quality Area 1 (QA1) Program and practice, and Quality Area 6 (QA6) Collaborative partnerships with families and communities. Similarly to the National Regulations, throughout the NQS the family are for the most part positioned as passive receivers, with the ECP framed as a conduit of information. For example, Standard 1.3 Assessment and Planning, element 1.3.3 Information for families which states "Families are informed about the program and their child's progress" (Australian Children's Education and

Care Quality Authority, 2023, p. 149). With the exception of Element 6.1.2, the language of the NQS risks perpetuating the disempowerment of the parent, escalating the expert authoritarian role of the ECP. This concern has previously been raised by authors Hadley and Rouse (2018) and Rouse and O'Brien (2017). Their research identified that educators believe they are fulfilling their role requirements though this provision of information for families, however families are seeking more connection.

A key aspect of the NQS QA6 (Figure 2.6) reinforces the importance of advocating for the authentic engagement of families through active participation, and for educators and services to provide support for families in their parenting roles. Standard 6.1 discusses facilitating an understanding of expectations, attitudes, and knowledge through respectful communication between stakeholders (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). Creating welcoming environments for diverse families where inclusive collaborative partnerships are encouraged is affirmed as building connections and trusting relationships (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). Furthermore, a document entitled 'Guide to the NQS' also outlines for readers (aimed at educators more so than families) aspects of the Quality Area that assessors (in the Assessment and Rating process) might observe in practice, sight in documentary evidence, or discuss with the service. Focused on how educators support and facilitate collaborative partnerships with families, the guide suggests "supportive, respectful relationships with families which are fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023, p. 252).

While outlining the nature of collaborative partnerships that might be sighted, discussed, or evidenced by Authorised Officers undertaking assessments of the

service, the NQS lacks a guide to support educators and families in understanding the mechanisms by which to develop these relationships.

Figure 2.6

National Quality Standards Quality Area 6

QA6		Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role.
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision-making about their child's learning and wellbeing.
6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.
6.2	Collaborative partnerships	Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing.
6.2.1	Transitions	Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.
6.2.2	Access and participation	Effective partnerships support children's access, inclusion and participation in the program.
6.2.3	Community engagement	The service builds relationships and engages with its community.

Note: Source ACECQA. (2012). *National Quality Standard*. Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

2.5.3. Approved Learning Frameworks

Australian ECEC curricula operate in an outcomes-based approach where educational practices promote children's learning, growth, and development holistically. Under the National Law and Regulations, Australian early learning services deliver education and care programs to children that are based on approved learning frameworks that support the developmental needs of the child, and their interests. The two approved learning frameworks are Being, Belonging and Becoming: The EYLF for birth to school age (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a), and My Time, Our Place (MTOP): Framework for school aged care in Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022b).

Educators in ECEC services develop observation and planning cycles where opportunities for children's learning are guided by these outcomes. An underlying

principle of the EYLF is Partnering with Parents (Principle 2) where families are valued for their unique knowledge of the child (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a). Reinforcing the positive outcomes achieved through family-educator partnerships, the EYLF also promotes developing a foundation of expectations, valuing of expertise, trust, and communication (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a; Hadley & Rouse, 2018).

2.5.4. Assessment and Rating (A&R)

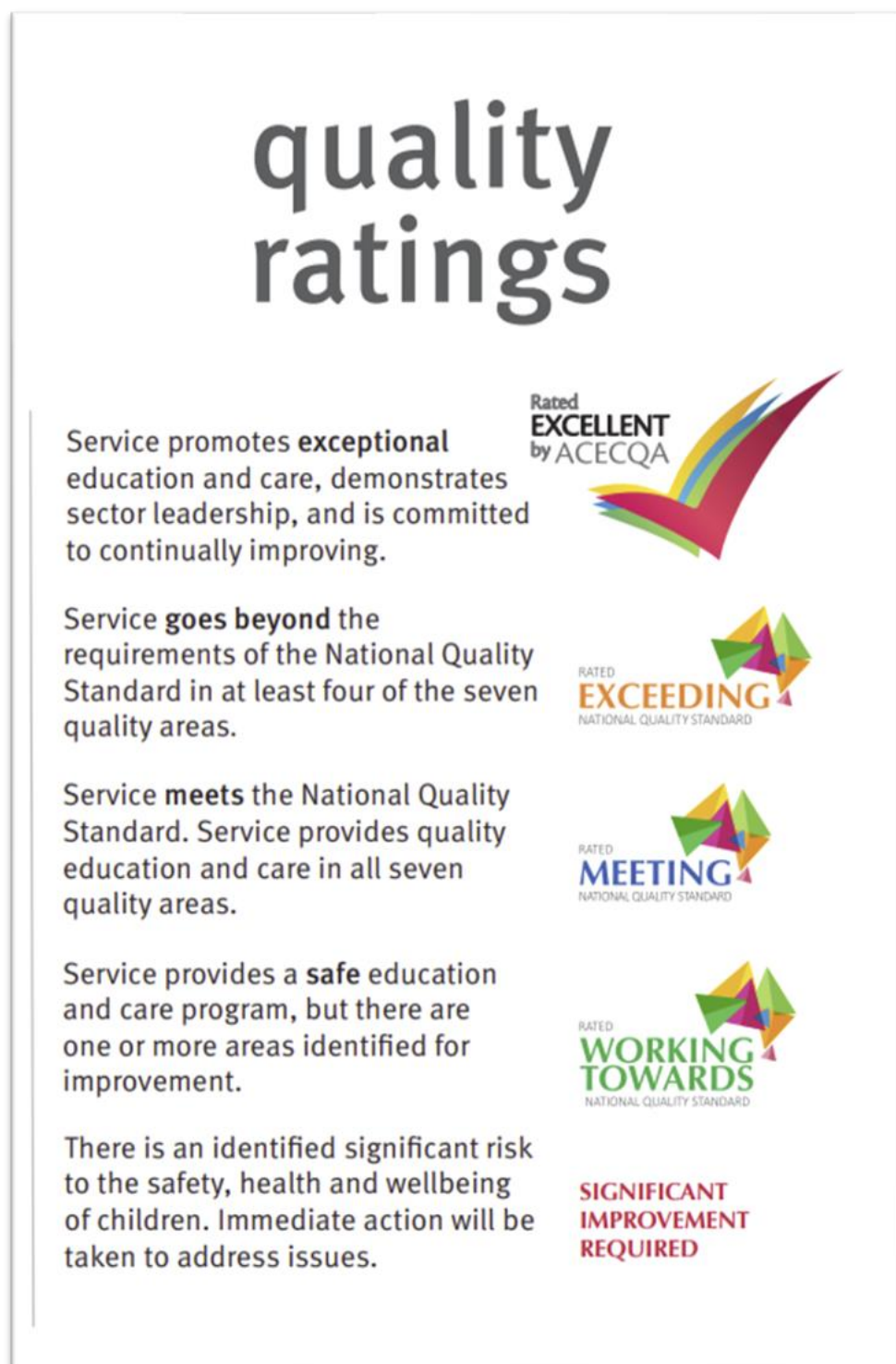
Reflecting a drive towards regulating for quality, all of Australia's education and care services are rated by their State regulatory authority (usually Department of Education) against the seven quality areas of the NQS. A robust set of quantifiers enables each standard and element to be assessed individually, contributing to the cumulative overall rating. Each of the 15 standards and 40 elements are observed and assessed, with a rating applied. The rating scale is from Requires Significant Improvement, Working Towards National Standard, Meeting National Standards, Exceeding National Standards, and finally Excellent, as presented in Figure 2.7.

2.5.5. Exceeding the National Quality Standard

In the first quarter (January to March) of 2021, 29% of Australian ECEC services were rated overall as 'Exceeding' the NQS (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021). To achieve this rating overall, the service must be rated exceeding in four of the seven quality areas with two of these to include QA 1 Program and Practice, QA 5 Relationships with Children, QA 6 Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities, and/or QA 7 Governance and Leadership as shown in Figure 2.8

Figure 2.7

National Quality Standard Rating Scale



Note: Quality Ratings by ACECQA, 2024

(<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/assessment/assessment-and-rating-process>). Copyright 2024

by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

Figure 2.8

Determining Exceeding NQS Rating



Note: Adapted from New guidance determining exceeding NQS, ACECQA, 2018, (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-06/NewGuidanceDeterminingExceedingNQS.pdf>) and Seven Quality Areas, ACECQA, 2024 ([QAPosters_NQS_0.pdf \(acecqa.gov.au\)](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/QAPosters_NQS_0.pdf)). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

It is mandated in the NQF that all services maintain a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) that guides the direction of their critical reflection, highlights strengths, and facilitates planning on areas of improvement. Additionally, this document acts as a live self-assessment tool for services. The exceeding themes, of which there are three, must be evidenced throughout the QIP and in practice during the assessment and rating process for a quality area to be rated exceeding. These themes are: That

exceeding practices are 1. Embedded in practice, 2. Informed by critical reflection and 3. Shaped by meaningful engagement with families and/or the community.

Pertinent at this juncture is a consideration, from a strengths-based perspective, of how services rated Exceeding in QA6 Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities are enacting this successfully? The NQS assessment and rating results of exceeding rated services in 2021 allude to either a contradiction with previous research findings by Rouse and O'Brien (2017) and Hadley and Rouse (2018) regarding a lack of collaborative practices, or improved practices being evidenced in services in the time since these publications. With limited recent exploration in this area, the field would benefit from further insights into practices that consider the specific mechanisms of how to collaboratively partner with families (Cutshaw et al., 2022) at an exceeding level.

2.6. Tensions in Implementing Collaborative Partnerships Under the NQF

The intricacies of measuring quality in ECEC are elusive. This also relates to measuring quality in terms of collaborative partnerships. One intent of the NQF was to energise the sector towards attaining new levels of quality outcomes (Fenech et al., 2019; Phillips & Fenech, 2023; Togher & Fenech, 2020). Work by Rouse (2012) leveraged early investigations into Australian ECEC settings and the relationships between families and ECPs following the development of the NQF. Numerous authors have since deconstructed the framework to illuminate the impact of the indistinct language within the NQF posing as a barrier that challenges the effective implementation of collaborative partnerships (Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Siraj et al., 2019).

Collaboration in educational settings is promoted as allowing for the deconstruction of barriers, increased understanding and embracing of diversity (Ali et

al., 2022; Haines et al., 2022; Roberts, 2017; Rouse, 2012). Utilising collaboration to harness strong productive partnerships with families (Dunst et al., 2019; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008), increases quality of ECEC services (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). It is an expectation of the Australian NQF that educators collaborate with families. This is evidenced by collaborative partnerships with families being one of the seven pivotal quality areas of the NQS and a key principle of the EYLF. Furthermore, the NQS and EYLF highlight the significance of families as first educators in a child's life, and the essential quest of ECPs in harnessing this capacity (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). With varying conceptualisation of what parent involvement and engagement looks like, it is of value to consider how the ECP and family are positioned in the creation of collaborative partnerships.

It is argued that the lack of clarity around terms and definitions of parent engagement, involvement and collaboration may be a contributing factor in poor quality partnerships in education settings (Gross et al., 2019; Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Contradictory discourses perpetuate the complexities of negotiating roles and expectations for stakeholders in collaborative partnerships. Intended to guide educators in collaborative partnerships with families, QA6 of NQS offers direction such as Element 6.2.1 that states "continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). Through the provision of information, educators are considered to be accomplishing the goal of the NQS.

In enacting the outcomes of NQS QA6 and Principle 2 of EYLF, ECPs are sharing information and making available to families details of the service, the program and the child; where the family is positioned as a non-critical contributor and

simple recipient of information. Fenech et al. (2019) note the NQS and EYLF generate a discourse of information exchange that embeds the notion of ECEC provision as a service. They surmise this elicits discrepancies between expectations and outcomes for ECPs and families alike (Fenech et al., 2019). Practitioners, influenced by these curriculum and framework discourse under which they operate, indicated they believe they are achieving the outcomes of the NQF in relation to collaborative partnerships with families (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Murphy et al.'s (2021) study reported that families however, were left feeling unsatisfied, requesting broader communication and engagement around their child's learning and development progress. Replete with definition ambiguities, the NQF fails to offer educators nor families the roadmap they seek on how to foster collaborative partnerships and harness the capabilities of such, weakening the relationship (Gross et al., 2019; Siraj et al., 2019).

2.6.1. Positioning of Families

Various studies have identified the positioning of families in ECEC in markedly different orientations (Sheridan et al., 2019; Siraj et al., 2019), depending on the service type (i.e., for profit service long day care versus community-based kindergarten). A paradoxical relationship surfaces when families enrol in ECEC. As customers in a marketised commodity the family have increasing demands and expectations in a purchaser-provider relationship (Fenech et al., 2019; Markström & Simonsson, 2017). Alternatively, as guardians and caregivers, families hold expert knowledge of the child and are active agents who partner with professionals towards child-oriented goals (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017; Vuorinen, 2020). The variances in the role expectations and anticipated outcomes for, on and by families alludes to the reported disharmony in their ECEC experiences.

In 2019, Fenech et al. summarised two decades of research on family choices around ECEC service selection to state parents were uninformed consumers relying on colloquial recommendations and “gut feelings” in choosing where to send their children. In Australia, where the supply of ECEC services is driven by a competitive market-based approach, it is concerning that there is reportedly limited family awareness of the assessment and rating results reflecting service quality under the NQF (Fenech et al., 2019). The voice of the family is unaccounted for in recent collaborative partnership research that primarily focuses on policy and practitioners perspectives (Lang et al., 2016; Vuorinen, 2020). Findings of recent studies contributing positively to this space have acknowledged that how a family views their role and relationships within the service directly shapes the environment (Almendingen et al., 2021; Forry et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2021; Wolf, 2020), and that whilst families wish to influence the ECEC setting there are limited opportunities to do genuinely do so (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017).

Heavy regulation of curriculum and legislative operational frameworks limit a family’s ability to impact major drivers in Australian ECEC settings. Overwhelmingly, at an interaction level, families wish to feel welcomed in the setting (Murphy 2021). Positive relationship building was found to increase when ECPs approached families by greeting them by name, sharing photos of the child and anecdotes of their time in the setting (Almendingen et al., 2021; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). ECPs who encourage families to share information and promote the family as knowledgeable first educator of child create positive and responsive environments that foster elements collaborative partnerships such as trust (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). It would be worthwhile for future studies to harness the family voice in research to

deepen understandings of how they describe their experiences of successful collaborative partnerships.

2.6.2. Positioning of Educators

Rouse and O'Brien (2017) study noted that ECPs believe the work they are doing as detailed in the NQF is achieving the required outcomes of the National Standard. Throughout the framework the language used, and the way the documents are written, indicate that the educator's role is the simple provision of information to families. Element 6.1.3 of the NQS is titled "Families are supported" and states "Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and wellbeing" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023, p. 289). In ECEC services this might look like the classroom program on the wall, a child's portfolio and daily update emailed, or the menu being provided to families. By "making available" the seemingly one-dimensional information for families, educators are interpreting this as meeting the NQS. Opportunities exist to exceed this practice by adding further dimensions to these fundamental requirements through interaction. Educators in the field have an opportunity to move beyond basic interpretations of the NQF but require training and support to do so (Petrovic et al., 2019; Sheridan et al., 2009) .

Fenech et al. (2019) discuss a 'spectrum of intentionality' of ECPs interaction with families as ranging from reactionary through to focused proactive action. Their study found that ECPs predicted parents perceived needs (e.g., that a parent would feel anxious on their child's first day) and responsively then attend to the information type and behaviours in engaging with family (Fenech et al., 2019). It was found that whilst educators understand the importance of engaging with families, many felt unprepared or challenged, especially if confronted with raising concerns

conversationally (Almendingen et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2018). The variety of professional developments available to educators supports theory and knowledge development, however Petrovic et al. (2019) highlight the paucity of skill building “how to” guides for educators in working with families.

Murphy et al. (2021) found contradictory results in their examination of ECPs confidence in working with families. In interviews ECPs detailed confidence in working with families, but later stated their uncertainty in how to enact such interactions (Almendingen et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021). These findings support earlier research that evidence ECPs hesitations around how to collaborate with families, feeling ill-equipped to address the complex social and personal challenges facing parents (Laletas et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2018) in addition to the growth and development needs of the child. The Victorian intervention *Partnering with Parents* (Almendingen et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021) initiative went some way towards filling the gap in educator training with practical strategies around sensitive conversations with families, however fell short of significant impact in the field as the program remains subscription based through the Parenting Research Centre. Potentially making it unattainable to the general early childhood community, the \$13 860.00 course cost could be prohibitive. A number of limitations were highlighted in this study, particularly the possibility of recall bias by using retrospective self-assessment measurements, and additionally, a significantly high proportion of participants were identified as Bachelor degree qualified (Murphy et al., 2021).

Togher and Fenech (2020) found that higher qualifications equated to greater educator capacity, supported by Fenech et al. (2019) and Ward and Perry (2018), whose findings established that higher qualified ECPs were more proactive in their attempts to build relationships with families. Interestingly this is contrary to Cutshaw

et al. (2022) results that demonstrated no association between the qualification of the ECP and family engagement, rather that respondents (ECPs) positioned themselves as superior to families. Parents were reported to perceive power imbalances as dominant in the list of barriers to building effective partnership practices (Vuorinen, 2020), hindering efforts with families (Cutshaw et al., 2022). More successfully, Owen et al. (2000) found a nonauthoritarian ECP created greater opportunities for partnership and engagement practices with parents.

Being ideally placed to support families, educators uncertainties in approaching families diminish opportunities to build foundational components of collaborative partnerships such as respect, communication, shared learning and trust (Beaumont-Bates, 2017; Laletas et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2018; Phillipson, 2017). Empirical research raises concerns over the impact of power relations when ECPs view themselves as authoritarian experts (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Fenech et al., 2019; Kambouri et al., 2021), while findings by others (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Hadley & Rouse, 2018) discuss this in terms of the disempowerment of families. Alternatively, ECPs are evidenced as being concerned that their advocacy could be misconstrued as confronting or dictating top-down communication, impeding relationships (Fenech et al., 2019; MacNaughton, 2011; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). The study by Fenech et al. (2019) however highlighted an important insight, being the risk in educators acquiescing to parent expectations is to forgo an opportunity to build family understanding. As evidenced in the work of Hadley and Rouse (2018) and Kambouri et al. (2021) aspects of the NQF remain problematic for educators to decipher, impeding their ability to execute it as intended. If educators and families were given tangible guidance on the development of, roles and responsibilities in,

and actioning of collaborative partnerships, there is opportunity to increase their success.

2.6.3. Expert Roles and a Balance of Power

Numerous scholars (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Fenech et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017) consider parent partnerships to be a social construction, significantly influenced by factors at all layers of the ecological system including policy priorities, culture, beliefs, and attitudes. Reaffirming a strengths based perspective, it is insightful to acknowledge that the “locus of control does not necessarily fit with a more knowledgeable expert” (Rouse, 2012, p. 22) in such empowered and family centred collaborative partnerships (Laletas et al., 2017) as are intended in the NQS. True partnerships demonstrate that the balance of power shifts to a more equal and reciprocal relationship when each member is recognised as an expert, be it on a topic or in this case expert knowledge of the child (Dunst et al., 2019; Rouse, 2012; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Trivette & Dunst, 2004). With an interdependence on shared understanding, trust is fundamental to family empowerment, particularly in decision making (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Laletas et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2018). Furthermore, collaborative partnerships are shown to strengthen and support functioning for families (Dunst et al., 2019; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

A “parallel expertise and proximity” to the child is promoted by Alasuutari (2010, p. 154) as framing the relationship between families and educators. Each of these stakeholders bring a unique perspective of the child, of differing yet equal value (MacNaughton, 2011). Unfortunately, an oversimplification of the educator-family relationship has been proliferated by policies and frameworks that omit definitions and expectations for stakeholders (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). Mason et al. (2023) provided a comprehensive consideration of balancing the capabilities of

both educator and family towards a model of shared support that harnesses perceived power imbalances in a positive light. They propose the capacity building nature of stakeholder expertise through the metaphor of a tandem bicycle, where the seating position, steering, direction of travel and momentum are achieved through true partnership practices. An opportunity exists to further this thinking as Waniganayake et al. (2012) advocates for conceptualisations of ways of working in power with, not power over families. To move from perceptions of expertise (MacNaughton, 2011) towards authentic and reflexive practices that embody the collaborative partnership ideals such as mutual learning through a bidirectional relationship (Polk & Knutsson, 2008), that develops knowledge production and competencies for both parties (Kahn, 2014; Laletas et al., 2017; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Tayler, 2006).

2.6.4. Future Opportunities

The research field calls for further considerations on the mechanisms through which quality educator-family relationships are developed and fostered (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012; Wolf, 2020). Lacking in current literature are observational studies that consider the nature of educator-family interactions (Vuorinen, 2020) with particular emphasis on the limited moments of time for educators and families to collaborate during drop off and pick up routines (Coelho et al., 2018). Deeper understandings of how collaborative partnerships are actualised successfully in practice are necessary (Kambouri et al., 2021; Petrovic et al., 2019) while elevating the voice and perspective of multiple stakeholders (Almendingen et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021).

Successful educator-family relationships are determined by the quality of interactions, not the quantity of contacts (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Reinforced

through the interdependent systems simultaneously influencing the phenomenon, the bidirectional nature of the family-educator relationship in a systems approach draws into focus to the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Whilst the frequency of family-educator interactions may be mandated at a macrosystem (for example through the NQS prescription of communication requirements for ECEC services as discussed in Section 2.4), it is conceivable that the components that create collaborative partnerships are negotiated at the mesosystem level. Of benefit in providing clarity for the ECEC sector and its stakeholders would be a consolidation of collaborative partnership models and the components that characterise them. There is opportunity for such considerations to inform future educational reforms, policies, frameworks, and curricula providing transparency and a tangible guide for educators and families alike.

2.7. Existing Models of Family Engagement, Involvement, Participation, and Collaboration

Deprived of tangible answers in the NQF, the ECEC sector may turn to external sources for guidance on how to foster collaborative partnerships. Numerous authors (for example Epstein (2010), Rouse and O'Brien (2017), Kambouri et al. (2021) and others) have published models specific to family participation and involvement in schools, early childhood services, and classrooms. The appropriateness of many existing models and practice guides for the Australian early childhood setting is a subject of conjecture. Several of the most widely cited, prominent models are explored below. At this juncture, the myriad of terms utilised in the consideration of family-educator or family-service provider relationships again muddies the water for concise definition and application. These terms include, but

are not limited to participation, involvement, engagement, partnership, and collaboration.

Three involvement and participation-oriented models by Epstein (2010); Fan et al. (2018); Fantuzzo et al. (2000) will be shown, followed by five models that align more deeply with collaboration and partnership ideals. The demonstration of these models here is to provide an oversight to the diversity of existing literature and models, while exposing the lack of clarity or streamlining to collaborative partnerships across the vast array of approaches in the education sector.

2.7.1. *Involvement Oriented Models*

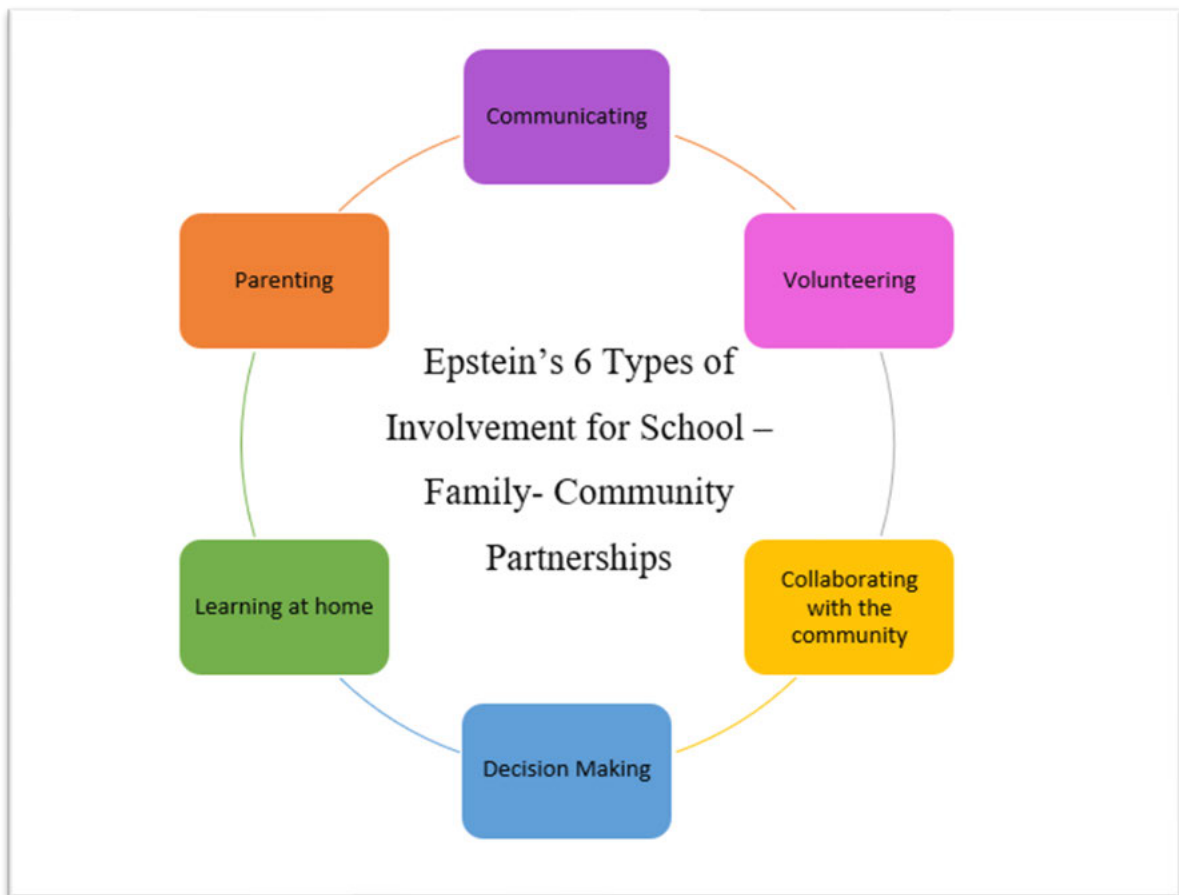
Three involvement-oriented models are outlined from within the literature: Epstein's (2010) six types of involvement, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) Barriers to parental involvement reformulated by Fan et al., (2018), and Fantuzzo et al. (2000) Family involvement questionnaire.

Epstein's six types of involvement.

Involvement contributes to relational and participatory practices promoted as having the greatest impact on outcomes for children (Dunst et al., 2019; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Epstein (2010) provided six components for involving families and communities in schools, in Figure 2.9, that support positive outcomes for children. These components encourage a variety of parent-child, family-school, and community interactions. The importance of co-developed and two-way partnerships is accentuated in this model; however, it fails to consider the implications of complex relationships between stakeholders. Continued enhancements could be made to consider meaningful practices of engagement.

Figure 2.9

Epstein's Six Types of Involvement



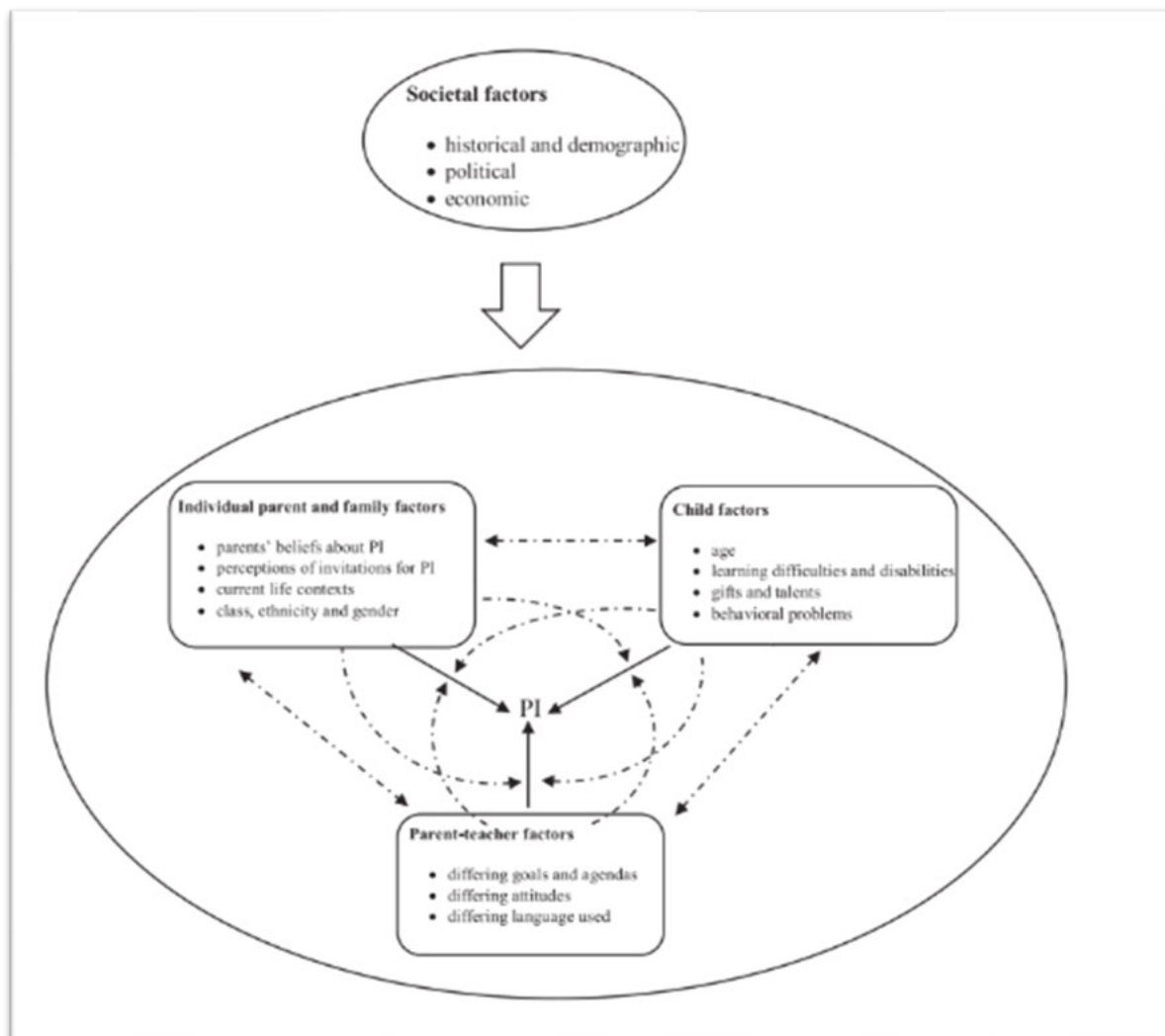
Note: Adapted from “School, family, and community partnerships preparing educators and improving schools,” by J. Epstein, 2010, Westview Press

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Fan et al. (2018) Barriers to parental involvement.

Extending on the notion of involvement, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) offer a parental involvement framework. Reformulated in by Fan et al. (2018) (Figure 2.10) who sought to improve the original model by taking into consideration the broader context of societal influence and the variety of factors that influence relationships within the space. Both Fan et al. (2018) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011) concede the complexities of parent involvement in education warrant further research.

Figure 2.10

Parental Involvement Framework



Note: From “A reformulated model of barriers to parental involvement in education: comment on Hornby and Lafaele (2011),” by W. Fan, N. Li, and J. Sandoval, 2018, *Educational review*, 70(1), p. 122 (DOI10.1080/00131911.2018.1388614).

Fantuzzo et al. (2000) Family Involvement questionnaire.

Fantuzzo et al. (2000) offer a method of measuring parent engagement based on involvement, rather than a model. The Family Involvement Questionnaire, seen in Figure 2.11, was developed to foster the dynamic two-way connection between home and school settings. Their goal was “bringing these two important spheres of

influence together in supportive collaborations holds great promise for maximizing the academic achievements of young students” (Fantuzzo et al., 2000, p. 375).

Figure 2.11

Fantuzzo’s Family Involvement Questionnaire

Table 1
Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Cluster Structures for Family Involvement Questionnaire Factors

Item content by factor	Varimax ^a	Promax ^b	R ² with own cluster	R ² with next cluster	Structure loading
School-Based Involvement ($\alpha = .85$)^c					
I volunteer in my child's classroom	.71	.72	.55	.16	.74
I participate in parent and family social activities with the teacher	.63	.61	.53	.20	.73
I participate in planning classroom activities with the teacher	.63	.61	.51	.19	.71
I go on class trips with my child	.61	.64	.41	.10	.64
I talk with other parents about school meetings and events	.61	.58	.50	.20	.65
I participate in planning school trips for my child	.55	.53	.43	.16	.65
I meet with other parents from my child's class outside of school	.50	.48	.33	.11	.57
I hear teachers tell my child how much they love learning	.47	.42	.37	.21	.61
I participate in fundraising activities in my child's school	.46	.45	.30	.09	.55
I feel that parents in my child's classroom support each other	.41	.39	.23	.08	.48
Home-Based Involvement ($\alpha = .85$)					
I spend time working with my child on number skills	.68	.68	.54	.12	.74
I spend time working with my child on reading/writing skills	.65	.67	.48	.14	.66
I talk to my child about how much I love learning new things	.65	.68	.54	.13	.73
I bring home learning materials for my child (videos, etc.)	.60	.62	.46	.09	.68
I spend time with my child working on creative activities	.59	.61	.44	.08	.66
I share stories with my child about when I was in school	.53	.56	.39	.10	.62
I see that my child has a place for books and school materials	.52	.53	.33	.06	.57
I take my child places in the community to learn special things (i.e., zoo, museum)	.50	.54	.38	.12	.62
I maintain clear rules at my home that my child should obey	.48	.49	.25	.04	.50
I talk about my child's learning efforts in front of relatives	.48	.48	.30	.07	.55
I review my child's school work	.42	.43	.21	.05	.45
I keep a regular morning and bedtime schedule for my child	.41	.42	.18	.02	.43
I praise my child for school work in front of the teacher	.39	.45	.27	.19	.52
Home-School Conferencing ($\alpha = .81$)					
I talk to the teacher about how my child gets along with his/her classmates at school	.63	.70	.58	.20	.76
I talk with my child's teacher about classroom rules	.60	.66	.52	.19	.72
I talk to my child's teacher about his/her difficulties at school	.58	.64	.51	.14	.71
I talk with my child's teacher about school work to practice at home	.58	.67	.54	.20	.77
I talk to my child's teacher about my child's accomplishments	.57	.67	.56	.24	.75
I talk to my child's teacher about his/her daily routine	.54	.63	.50	.20	.71
I attend conferences with the teacher to talk about my child's learning or behavior	.51	.54	.34	.12	.58
The teacher and I write notes about my child or school activities	.49	.52	.28	.08	.53
I schedule meetings with administration to talk about problems or to gain information	.45	.51	.30	.18	.55
I talk with my child's teacher on the telephone	.41	.43	.20	.09	.45
I talk with my child's teacher about personal or family matters	.41	.46	.24	.14	.49

Note : From “Family Involvement Questionnaire: A multivariate assessment of family participation in early childhood education,” by J. Fantuzzo, E. Tighe, and S. Childs, 2000, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(2), p. 370 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.92.2.367>).

This multidimensional scale was developed for a study with a specific urban, low socio-economic, minority-oriented school district and may not be replicable in broader early childhood populations. The self-reporting nature also posed reliability concerns regarding bias and inaccuracies. While a useful tool, interpretations of

results using this questionnaire should be corroborated with data from other or multiple data collection sources.

The common thread through these involvement-based models is the onus on family to participate in the teacher or schools' program. There is little common ground upon which collaborative partnerships can be developed, as the authoritarian nature of the educator and hierarchical ownership of the space is dictated by interactions occurring on the school site with the family positioned as provider of support (e.g., parent volunteer to assist in classroom) or receiver of information. Comparatively in partnership models, collaboration underpins the intent to willingly join together to cooperate, in negotiation of space, time, goals and values (Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Phillipson, 2017). Epstein (2010); Halgunseth (2009); Kambouri et al. (2021); Murphy et al. (2021) all contributed models of partnership or engagement aimed at supporting successful relationships between educators and families.

2.7.2. Engagement Oriented Models

Highlighted in the literature are five prominent engagement-oriented models including: Halgunseth's (2009) model of family engagement, Rouse (2012) Model of family centred practice, Rouse and O'Brien's (2017) Parent-teacher partnership model, Partnering with Parents model by the Parenting Research Centre and Kambouri et al. (2021) Making partnerships work: The café model.

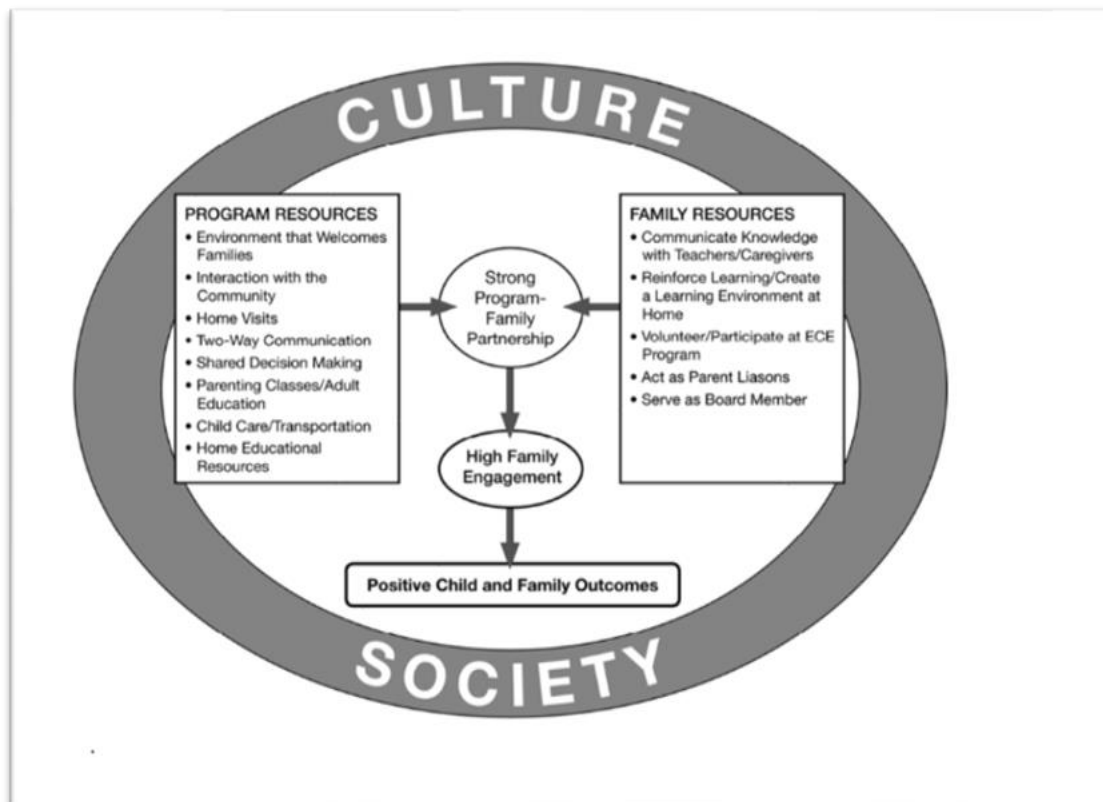
Halgunseth (2009) Model of family engagement.

Halgunseth (2009) presents a model where culturally sensitive program and family resources come together to foster strong partnerships through deep understandings of components such as mutual trust. Profoundly embedded in a social-ecological approach this model harnesses the capacity of positive influences at each system level for greater outcomes for the child. The model offers little

differentiation or flexibility as its rigid method requirements for engagement impose numerous constraints (time, financial and institution) that may limit family's uptake of this approach.

Figure 2.12

Model of Family Engagement



Note: From "Family engagement, diverse families, and an integrated review of the literature," by L. Halgunseth, 2009, *YC Young Children*, 64(5), p. 57.

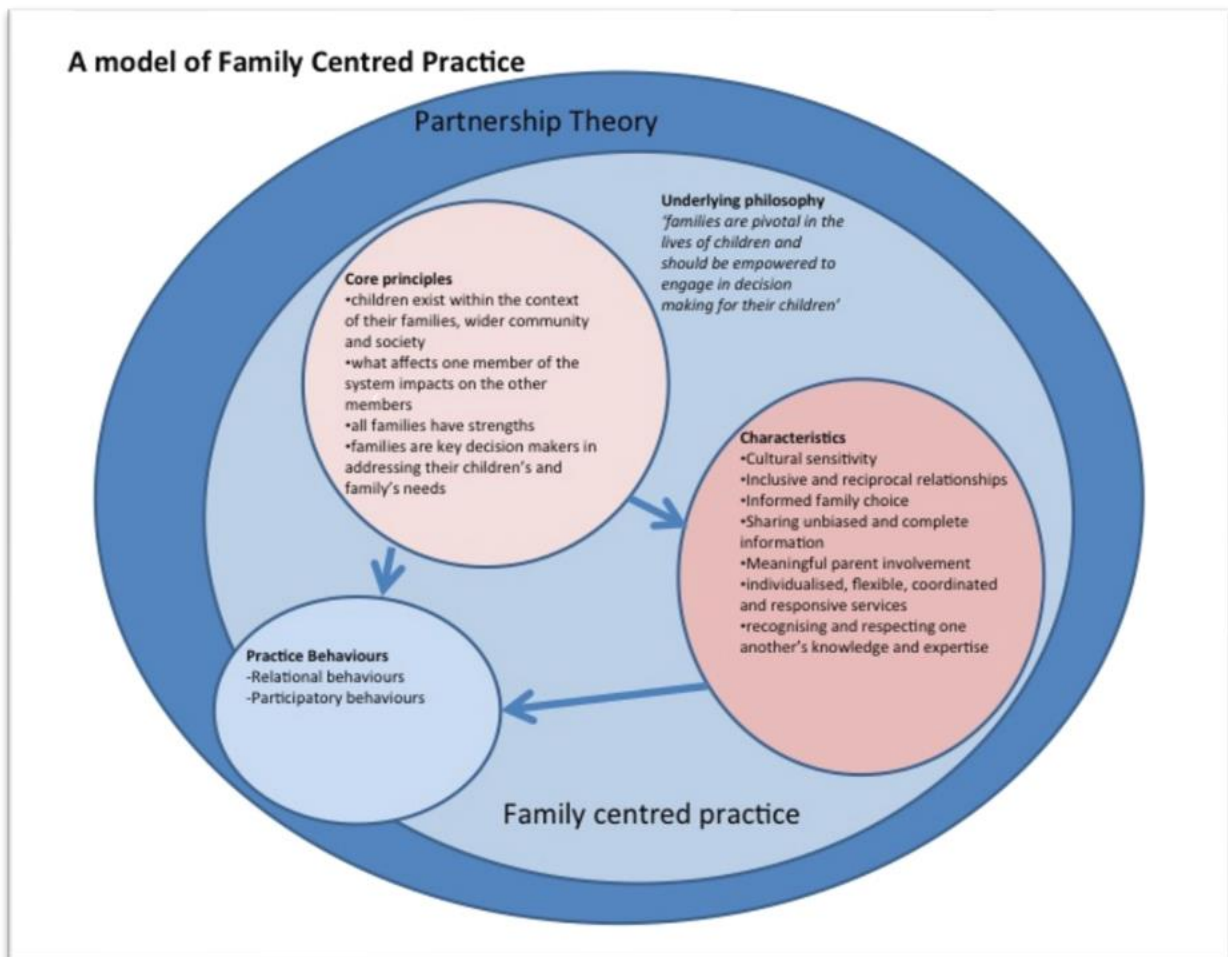
Rouse (2012) Model of family centred practice.

Rouse (2012) developed a model of Family Centred Practice that empowers families to engage in decision making for their children guiding practices of educators through core relational and participatory behaviours. While requiring an acknowledgement and acceptance of an underlying philosophy, this model places family in an empowered and respected position that reaffirms the problem-solving intent of the collaborative partnership. However, while propelling the positioning of

families, application of this model may be constrained as it disempowers educators in professional positions.

Figure 2.13

Rouse's Model of Family Centred Practice



Note: From "Family-centred practice: Empowerment, self-efficacy, and challenges for practitioners in early childhood education and care," by E. Rouse, 2012, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 13(1), p. 21 (<https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.1.17>)

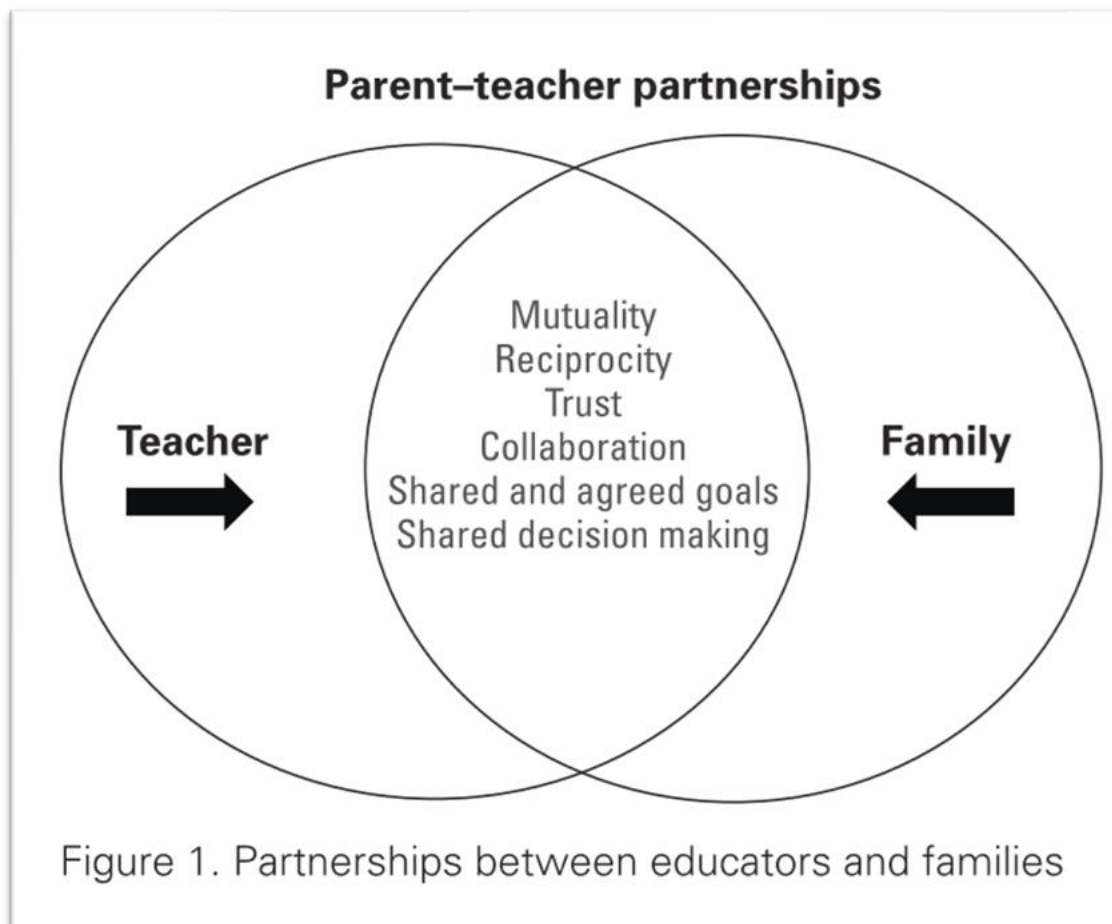
Rouse and O'Brien (2017) Parent-teacher partnerships.

Rouse and O'Brien (2017) identified a parent-teacher partnership that acknowledges the expertise held by both in regard to the child. The model encourages respect and regard for stakeholders, with an interdependence on shared knowledge that underpins the educator-family relationship. The model approaches

collaborative partnerships from a strengths-based approach, harnessing the capacity and agency of stakeholders, beyond task-based involvement in school settings.

Figure 2.14

Rouse and O'Brien's Parent-Teacher Partnerships Model



Note: From "Mutuality and reciprocity in parent-teacher relationships: Understanding the nature of partnerships in early childhood education and care provision," by E. Rouse and D. O'Brien, 2017, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(2), p. 47 (<https://doi.org/10.23965/ajec.42.2.06>)

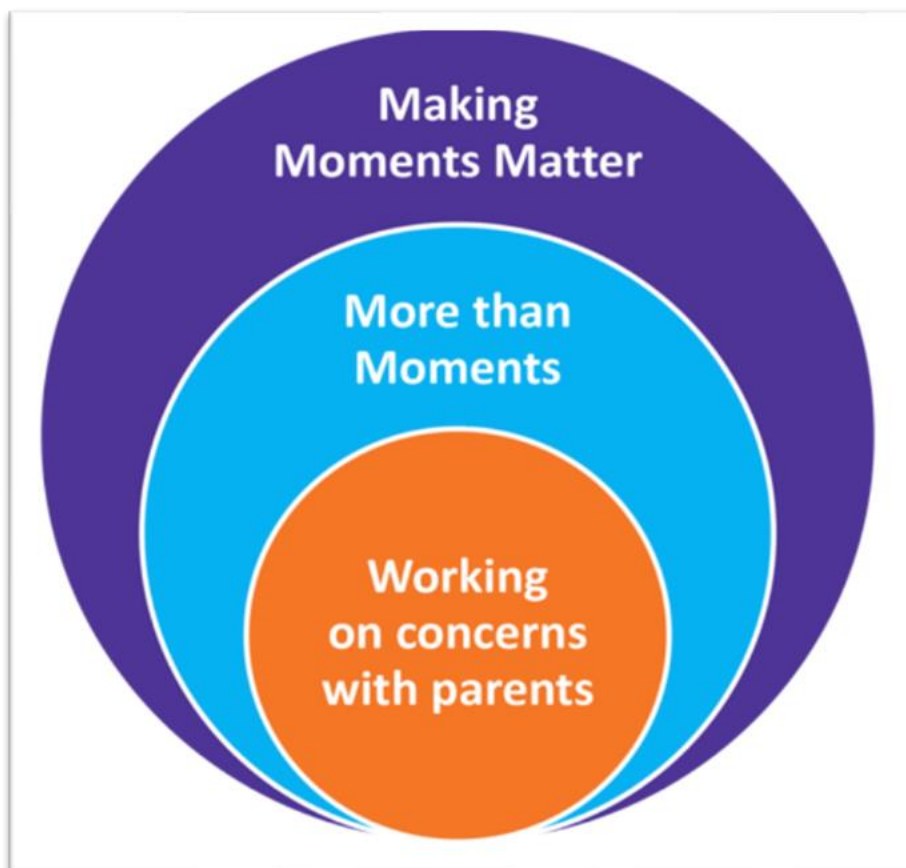
Murphy et al. (2021) Partnering with parents.

Murphy et al. (2021) and the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) developed the below model of partnership through a research project funded by the Victorian Government, to provide an intervention program designed to support ECPs in

working with families. ECEC services engage PRC for a 10-week professional development program that offers strategies for working with families in centre-based care. This program intends to fill the void of professional development programs articulated by Sheridan et al. (2009). The PRC however may not attain this goal given the excessive price point at which the program is set meaning their program may never reach the educators who need this support and guidance in their professional practice.

Figure 2.15

Parenting Research Centre's Partnering with Parents Model



Note: From *Partnership with Parents*, by Parent Research Centre (PRD) 2021, (https://www.parentingrc.org.au/programs/partnering_with_parents/). Copyright 2014-2024 Parenting Research Centre.

Implementation of such a significant program hinge on the availability of stakeholders (ECEC services, families and educators) time and finances, as well as

their capacity to participate. This study provided great insight into the barriers impacting successful collaborative partnerships, however the proposed solution falls short of broadly impacting the field due to its length, cost, and inaccessibility to the general population of educators and families seeking resources.

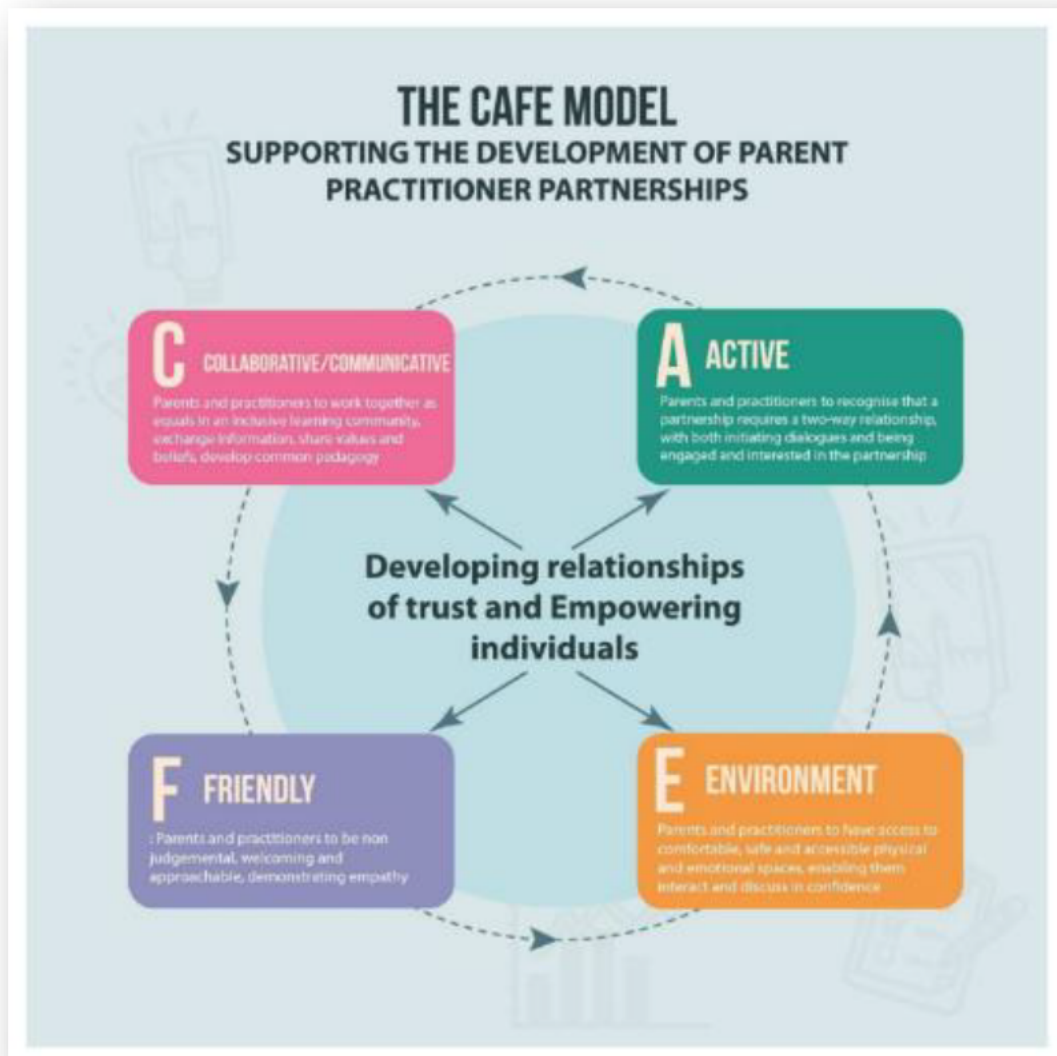
Kambouri et al. (2021) CAFÉ Model

Kambouri et al. (2021) acknowledge the numerous barriers to effective collaborative partnerships. They include organisational structures that limit opportunities to build essential partnership practices such as trust, these broadly include rostering, workforce shortages or inconsistencies, appropriate environments for discussion and time (Coelho et al., 2018; Fenech et al., 2019; MacNaughton, 2011).

Their study sought to remove obstacles such as time and space by offering parents and practitioners “partnership sessions” external to the ECEC setting, through which to discover the key characteristics of a partnership model for the early years. Kambouri et al. (2021), inspired by Froebel’s concept of unity, utilised a mixed methods approach to harness participant (parent and educator) perceptions of working in partnership, resulting in a model to support the development of parent-practitioner partnerships (Figure 2.16).

Figure 2.16

Making Partnerships Work: The Café Model



Note: From "Making partnerships work: Proposing a model to support parent-practitioner partnerships in the early years," by M. Kambouri, T. Wilson, M. Pieridou, S. F. Quinn and J. Liu, 2021, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(4), p.13 (10.1007/s10643-021-01181-6)

The models demonstrated here depict a broad array of components taken to enable and foster collaborative partnerships. They also offer a variety of considerations on the positioning, voice, value, and importance of stakeholders including educators and families. However, while these diverse models contribute to contemporary considerations of collaborative partnerships, as Mason et al. (2023)

identified a gap remains as to the specific mechanisms of how to actualise these partnerships in practice. As future opportunities to research in collaborative partnerships continue to arise, it is important to consider the complexities in doing so.

2.8. Collaborative Partnership Considerations in Research Design

Collaborative partnerships are a complex and multilayered phenomenon (Ouyang et al., 2020). Entangled in the very intention of their creation are systematic influences (particularly macro and micro system), as individuals and/or organisations come together to develop a partnership structure. The structure of the collaborative partnership influences the agency and actions of stakeholders (Bordogna, 2020). In reviewing existing research, it is worthy to consider the philosophical lens through which the phenomenon is viewed and consider how the choice of methodologies elicit various data types (Bordogna, 2020; Gray, 1989; Hartman, 2018; Provan & Kenis, 2007; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). Two distinct paradigms predominantly appear throughout current considerations of Collaborative Partnerships, these being functionalist and interpretivist.

Quantitative in nature and a data generating exercise, functionalist outcomes are oriented towards means-end or commercial decision making (Mabey & Freeman, 2010). They provide structure and objectives that offer knowledge production towards practical solutions. For these reasons utilising a functionalist paradigm supports the purpose and benefits of collaborative partnerships (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard & Wolfram Cox, 2013). Functionalist design orients the strategic intention of the collaborative partnership towards the problem solving goals of the collective. It is noted however by Bordogna (2020) that this approach does not go far

enough to explain the production nor features of collaborative partnerships, as it fails to appreciate the human side of the narrative.

Evidencing the nuanced and subjective side of collaborative partnerships, interpretivism focuses on operational practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Concerned with understanding roles, impacts of agency, and quality assurance (Bordogna, 2020; Heffernan & Poole, 2005), qualitative investigations into collaborative partnerships under this paradigm are relational, where an understanding of the lived experiences are fundamental. Stakeholders' collective active engagement towards the same objective evolves to create their partnership structure over time, it is rarely premeditated. Interpretivist and subjective approaches risk a lack of operational structure as the multiple perspectives create tension which influence partnership interactions (Bordogna, 2020; Burrell & Morgan, 1979)

Ultimately the work of functionalists offers an explanation of the status quo in maintaining order and consensus resulting in solutions and frameworks, while interpretivists consider the how and why of the factors within collaborative partnerships (Bordogna, 2020; Gray, 1989). Neither paradigm separately harnesses the structural and subjective complexities of collaborative partnerships. Literature on collaborative partnerships identifies conceptual, analytical, and practical gaps (Akhtar et al., 2019; Ouyang et al., 2020). Bordogna (2020) offers critical realism as one possible research paradigm that champions both structure and agency in the consideration of collaborative partnerships. It would be of value to the research community to better understand the mechanisms that foster collaborative partnerships through further innovative methodologies.

2.9. Chapter Summary

This literature review has provided extensive detailing of collaborative partnerships from an interdisciplinary perspective. Narrowing focus to considerations of collaborative partnerships within education settings, this chapter then explored current research on the value and importance of these partnerships in early childhood settings. Positioning the discussion within the context of Australia's National Quality Framework, the literature scrutinised the positioning of educators and families across the variety of documentation within this framework, including legislation and curricula.

Tensions in contemporary literature surfaced a mismatch between policy discourse and field practices, while existing models of involvement and engagement were identified for consideration. The complexities of researching collaborative partnerships were considered before illuminating unique methodological opportunities by which to fill the identified gaps in future research.

CHAPTER 3: PAPER 1 – “Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor”.

3.1. Introduction

This research paper was developed as a result of undertaking the literature review for this thesis. It evidences both a review of the literature, but also considers a nuanced perspective by which to contemplate the process of undertaking such a review. While providing global insight into the framing of collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings around the world, the article also offers the use of metaphor as a means by which to gain conceptual clarity when grappling with complex tensions in literature.

Submitted to *Early Childhood Education Journal* in December 2022, the paper was accepted for publication in September 2023. This is a Q1 journal, published by Springer and has an impact factor of 2.7 (2022). Presented in its published form, the citation for this article is:

Mason, K., Brown, A., & Carter, S. (2023). Capturing the Complexities of

Collaborative Partnerships in Early Childhood Through Metaphor. *Early*

Childhood Education Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01580-x>

3.2. Published Paper



Capturing the Complexities of Collaborative Partnerships in Early Childhood Through Metaphor

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Accepted: 16 September 2023
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Abstract

Within an early childhood setting strong collaborative partnerships between the service and the family are critical to the success of a child's development and learning. Collaborative interactions with families are considered indicators of quality within early childhood services. Whilst the value and importance of collaborative partnerships are widely agreed upon, the plethora of terms utilised to describe collaborative partnerships, and the multitude of models for its enactment have muddied the waters for successful interpretation and application in practice. This paper employs metaphor as a way of creating conceptual clarity of the complex issues surfaced in the literature related to collaborative partnerships and their intended implementation in curriculum and policy, and what practices occur in services globally. Findings highlight a mismatch between discourse and practice and elucidate the missed opportunities for collaborative partnerships towards improving service quality. Insights identified in this paper are relevant to the early childhood sector, highlighting a call for further clarity and interpretation of the term and mechanisms of quality collaborative partnership to inform practices in the field. This paper suggests new ways of thinking that rupture taken for granted viewpoints, offering the metaphor of a tandem bicycle to reflect the collaborative partnership between educators and families. This article provides a powerful provocation for the early childhood field to encourage reflection and refinement to existing conceptualisations of family-educator relationships.

Keywords Collaborative partnerships · Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) · Family-educator relationships · Metaphor

Collaborative partnerships in early childhood education and care (ECEC) remain a critical topic for developing insights for all EC stakeholders including researchers, practitioners, families, and community partners alike with the literature surrounding the topic, quite complex. Pivotal for the positive outcomes for children, families, and early childhood services the value of collaborative partnerships are extensively addressed in key national and international curriculum documents and research Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2021). These global perspectives on collaborative partnerships illuminate a broad diversity in the way educators and families engage and develop relationships (Kambouri et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2018).

Significant research exists on notions of family engagement, involvement, participation, and collaboration (Kambouri et al., 2021), where roles, responsibilities, and capacities of educators and families are interwoven (Dunst et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Within ECEC interconnected relationships between families and educators, their pre-existing beliefs, and expectations, as well as environmental and contextual considerations, culminate to impact stakeholder experiences (Brown, 2019; Gross et al., 2018). With such expansive and varied terminology being utilised broadly, researchers including Hadley and Rouse (2018) and Rouse and O'Brien (2017) claim the ambiguity of collaborative partnerships,

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and the components that enable them, has led to a mismatch between policy and practices in the field

Motivated by this lack of clarity, Author One engaged in a literature review over a twelve-month period (2021–2022) where the focus was on investigating the multifaceted nature of the relationship between educator and family in ECEC settings. Database searches were conducted utilising key words including ‘collaborative partnerships’, ‘parent or family engagement’, ‘family-educator partnerships’ that helped reveal an in-depth scholarly understanding and appreciation on this topic. Results of the literature search were narrowed, based on currency, to include peer reviewed publications since the year 2000, with the exception of historically seminal works. Focused the conceptualisation and application of collaborative partnerships, 91 publications contributed to the review. The connection between international ECEC frameworks, their articulation of stakeholder positioning, and evidence of practices in the field were revealed from the extensive review of the literature.

A further dilemma surfaced in the complexities that emerged from the *process* of synthesising diverse perspectives on collaborative partnerships. In seeking clarity whilst deep in the literature, the first author utilised critical colleagues (Author Two and Three) in proposing the notion of metaphor as a vehicle to make sense of and explain concepts and connections arising in the literature. This process included questions being posed, leading to further metacognition and deep reflection, resulting in the emergence of the *tandem bicycle* metaphor.

The use of metaphor can be a way of conceptualising and presenting literature. This paper shares insights, where metaphor is used to help the reader make sense of the synthesised literature and the tensions within. Metaphor is seen by the authors as particularly useful to think through complexities or dilemmas that are not easily explained (Southall, 2013). A metaphor of a *tandem bicycle* is used to reflect the collaborative partnership between educators and families and to pull together the key points raised in the literature regarding force, tension, unequal weighting in decision making and commitment to shared goals and reorganise patterns of thinking. Beginning by navigating a definition of collaborative partnerships, the paper then orientates the discussion within international education documentation. The authors introduce the use of metaphor to help to make sense of the complexities brought to light in the literature. Finally, they highlight opportunities for practitioners in the field to reframe their considerations of collaborative partnerships.

Resonating across the globe is the importance of collaborative partnerships, both within the literature, as well as in EC practice. The OECD (2021) list the engagement of EC services with families and communities to be as significant an indicator of quality as low child to educator

ratios, and qualifications of educator. Research from the United Kingdom and North America support this correlation between quality ECEC services (Cottle & Alexander, 2014) and outcomes for children (Hartman, 2018). Significantly reinforced in studies from New Zealand and Europe (Beaumont-Bates, 2017; Hujala et al., 2009) is a clear from the consensus that collaborative partnerships are not only valued but imperative to outcomes for children, relationships between stakeholders and service quality.

A key point to emerge from a review of the literature was the interconnectedness of collaborative partnerships and improvement processes, where the engagement of stakeholders towards a common goal seeks to improve outcomes (Stone, 2015) and quality practices (Choi & Choi, 2012). International research from the United States and Africa surfaced the process of collaboration requiring the act of working together (Choi & Choi, 2012), harnessing the ability to achieve more as a collective than is possible to accomplish alone (Stone, 2015). Similarly, further American research suggests through these efforts there emerges a co-creation of supportive environments that meet the needs of the collective, invested in a common goal that combines the interests of all stakeholders (Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). Insights from the literature highlight that this approach works to build the capacity of each stakeholder, as a byproduct of the journey towards quality improvement (Provan et al., 2005; Stone, 2015). Facilitated by this understanding we define collaborative partnerships as ‘*the connection of stakeholders who endeavour to work collectively to improve outcomes of a common goal*’.

Consistent with this narrative are key findings from the recent OECD ‘Starting Strong VI’ report ‘The Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review: Quality beyond Regulations’ that explored meaningful interactions between stakeholders across 120 ECEC settings, 26 countries, and 56 associated curriculum frameworks. The report highlights the diverse approaches to ECEC worldwide, as well as the complexities involved in analysing and comparing these (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021). Interestingly, underscored across international curriculum and frameworks is recognition of the importance of family involvement in ECEC services (OECD, 2021). Further, the report (OECD, 2021) highlights significant variation in how family engagement is referred to, with each country’s underpinning values and beliefs around the role of families in ECEC being articulated through the underlying pedagogical approaches in their associated curriculums.

As well, an international comparative study by Vlasov and Hujala (2017) considers the historical, economic, and socio-cultural influences on partnership roles across America, Russia, and Finland. A consistent theme within each of these contexts is the valuing of family-educator

relationships in the learning environment, yet these understandings and relationships are nuanced and contextual within each setting. This contextual boundedness is also echoed by the dominant discourses of each region's educational curriculum. Interestingly, the diversity of interpretations of family-educator relationships, manifested in associated curriculum frameworks also emerges as a key finding in the OECD report (2021) with these curricula recognised as an important tool in guiding educators, services, and families regarding ways in which to engage and cooperate that then translate into successful collaborative partnerships and quality standards (Boyd & Garvis, 2021).

An exploration of international research and ECEC frameworks provides further insights into interpretations and understandings of collaborative partnerships. For example, in Belgium, the Measuring and Monitoring Quality in Child Care for Babies and Toddlers is underpinned by a priority principal of partnership (*Measuring and Monitoring Quality in Childcare for Babies and Toddlers*, 2014). Similarly, the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) Quality Framework for birth to three services in the Netherlands places families as a primary source of influence and responsibility, where inclusion, diversity, and democracy together with respectful, reciprocal partnerships is at the heart of their focus on engagements between educators and families (ISSA, 2016). Finally, Ireland's Aistear EC Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) is intentional in reinforcing the focus of building partnerships with families, and Jamaica's Early Childhood Curriculum Guide utilise terminology of involving families (Davies, 2008).

As the delivery modes and models of ECEC continue to diversify, so to do the expectations on educators and families to collaborate with a collective focus on positive outcomes for children. However, alongside this goal is an ongoing confusion, in many cases, regarding the roles and responsibilities of families and educators. Researcher One could see this materialise in the conceptualisation of a metaphor to explain this tension. In these various ECEC service models, a range of factors influence how family-educator interactions are understood and enacted (Ali et al., 2022; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Cutshaw et al., 2022). For example, increasingly, families may experience an engagement model where they are seen as *consumers* in a marketised provision of a service, whereas at other times they may be seen as *active participants*, and encouraged alongside the service to have input into shared decision making of goals for their child (Fenech et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017).

Emerging from the international literature is the notion that once a family engages in an ECEC service a dichotomous relationship appears. In an Australian study, Fenech et al. (2019) found the family are considered consumers with expectations, whilst at the same time being knowledgeable

experts on their child and encouraged to share in the driving of goals and planning. In Sweden, an increased focus of families collaborating with educators saw a reenvisioning of active family engagements that improved home-school connections, but not without considerable negotiation of roles and expectations (Markström & Simonsson, 2017). The successful development of these authentic, trusting relationships between families and educators has the potential to improve ECEC quality outcomes (Vuorinen, 2020). Absent in much of the collaborative partnership literature is mention of family *voice* or *input* (Lang et al., 2016; Vuorinen, 2020) with significant gaps in research on the building of bonds between family and educator (Vuorinen, 2020). Vlasov and Hujala (2017) caution that if not carefully negotiated, power imbalances have the potential to threaten to weaken the relationship and connections between educator and family. Notably visible throughout the literature is the struggle for clarity of role accountabilities and expectations for and of the family and the educator in collaborative partnerships.

While national benchmarking reinforces a strong focus on quality across regions, researcher such as Rouse and O'Brien (2017), call out a disconnect in Australia between the intended notions of collaborative partnerships detailed in curriculum frameworks, and practices occurring in the field. Likewise in the United States, Gross et al. (2019) found that engagement practices were considered family responsibilities, even though the education policy documentation did not define it as such. There are international calls for improved execution of collaborative partnerships. American research by Cutshaw et al. (2022) and Vuorinen (2020) Swedish findings, concur with earlier Australian studies by Siraj et al. (2019) that a lack of consensus in collaborative partnership or engagement practice definitions leads to ambiguous interpretation and therefore ineffective application. Reflection on current interpretations and practices in the field, in addition to curriculum and framework reform, offers the potential to inform and guide an alignment of expectations and actions for families and educators in their roles in collaborative partnerships in ECEC services.

The Tensions in the Playground – the Emergence of a Metaphor

As authors we diverge slightly at this juncture to consider the theoretical underpinnings associated with the use of a metaphor as a means to potentially navigate through the diversity of literature that the narrative review unearthed. In this case, *metaphor* is understood to be a word, image or phrase used for rhetorical effect, offering comparison between things that are seemingly unrelated (Ortony et al., 1978). Collectively, the authors recognised metaphor as a

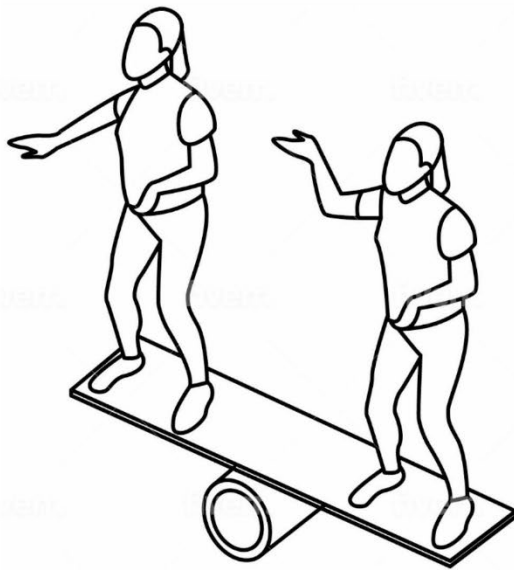


Fig. 1 Seesaw metaphor demonstrating balanced reciprocal relationships

valuable way to reorganise instilled patterns of thinking by offering clarity (Jakel, 2002), a way of enhancing communication, and opportunity for exploring of tensions emerging in the literature (Jubas & Seidel, 2016), as well as enabling sensitive subjects to be surfaced (Southall, 2013). Metaphor became the way for meanings to emerge as well as to see the meanings.

The use of metaphor helped Author One surface creative cognition, in terms metaphor inspiring creative thought and affording for revelatory insights (Southall, 2013). The understanding of metaphor is related to notions of cognitive development (Hoffman et al., 1991; Pollio & Pollio, 1979), and is noted for its usefulness in the learning process (Wilson, 2000). Way (1991) suggested that the use of metaphor allows for multiple interpretations involving assumptions and implications regarding the nature of language. The literature surfaced a variety of models for the use of metaphor with the authors electing to employ Cormac's Cognitive Theory of Metaphor as this model supported the pursuit of an important cognitive phenomenon (Mac Cormac, 1985), that of the researcher in the meaning making of the literature review. Employing a cognitive theory of metaphor involved the authors interpreting metaphor as an evolutionary knowledge process in which metaphors mediate between people's minds and culture (Mac Cormac, 1985), underpinned by a creativity hypothesis where the potential meaningfulness of metaphor does not surrender to basic paraphrasing (Jakel, 2002). The paper now moves through the literature related

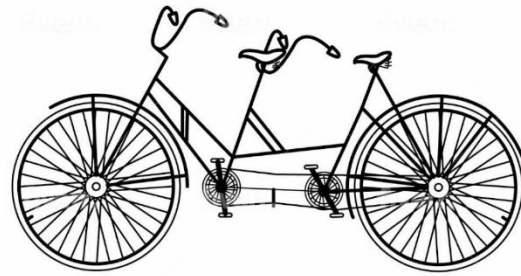


Fig. 2 A tandem bicycle demonstrating the metaphor of collaborative partnerships in ECEC

the consideration of stakeholders in collaborative partnerships, where the use of metaphor is woven throughout the discussion, to help in the sense-making process of comparing concepts surfaced in the literature to components of a *tandem bicycle*.

It Started on the Seesaw

The literature (Cottle & Alexander, 2014) highlights that the relationship of families and educators goes up and down, seeking a point of balance, like a seesaw. Families are recognised as a child's first educator, bringing with them competencies that reciprocally support the educator in their role (Hadley & Rouse, 2018, 2019; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). In reciprocal relationships the balance of power shifts gradually, like two children playing on a seesaw, as in Fig. 1. This up and down action of the seesaw reflects the engagement interrelationship between educator and families, making visible the intent of reciprocal, equal and trusting partnerships, where the shared goal on a seesaw is to maintain balance (not allowing the see-saw to touch the ground).

However, as each member of the partnership moves nearer or farther from the centre point, it requires a reciprocal movement from the counter members to maintain the balance. In relation to a collaborative partnership, this can be understood as the common goal, that can be preconceived, negotiated, and actioned in unison deliberately, or reactionary, or abruptly enforced by one party. This balance, the give and take interrelationship and reciprocity, surfaces in the literature and reflects current models of collaborative partnerships (Kambouri et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021). Unfortunately, current studies do not go far enough in addressing how to harness the shared synergy of stakeholders. With existing understandings of collaborative partnerships falling short in considering the continuation toward a common goal in situations where there is a shifting of power in a fluid and reflexive environment.

The Authors propose the metaphor of a *tandem bicycle* might better serve the needs of the educator and family in the playground, rather than the seesaw. Captured in the literature for its capability to enable the trajectory towards a common goal, is reflexivity. Reflexivity is a circular and bidirectional relationship, that impacts both parties (Laletas et al., 2017; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). It could be argued that the qualities of reflexivity are better suited to the interplay between families, educators, and systems. As collaborative partnerships are often a vehicle for change, the differing assumptions and agendas of stakeholders is a consideration in its success. Research, such as Stone (2015), suggest a reconceptualising of participation models, to surpass hierarchical, patriarchal or coercive notions of power, rather than command and control models have emerged in modern times, supporting a conceptual shift in thinking around ways of working (Liu et al., 2017).

Assembling the Tandem Bicycle

The complexities outlined in the literature could be likened to assembling the bicycle, with a limited understanding of how design components fit together to achieve balance for forward motion. We argue that this is similar to the lack of clarity around mechanisms of family engagement (Sheridan et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017), and the limited articulation of role expectations in how collaboration and partnership are conceptualised (Hadley & Rouse, 2018), that is surfaced in the literature. This ambiguity has a flow on effect to poor quality partnerships in education settings (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Others, like Cottle and Alexander (2014), profess that the oversimplification of the complexities of the educator-family relationship has contributed to the difficulty in defining this term. Given this, we suggest then an *instruction manual* would be beneficial to support the assemblage of a bicycle that acknowledges the complexities of first building then riding the tandem bicycle. Like the building of a collaborative partnership, interpreting the instructions, coordinating the parts, and amalgamating these for successful construction requires an understanding of roles, and an appreciation for each other's strengths.

As identified in the literature, practitioners are influenced by the curriculum and framework discourse under which they operate (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). This is supported by Hadley and Rouse (2018), who highlight the mismatch in the perceived role and expectations of self and other by educators and families. With varying conceptualisation of what family involvement and engagement looks like, it is of value to consider how the educator and family are positioned in the creation of collaborative partnerships. The literature surfaces the importance of decision making in a

manner similar to where the seats are placed on the tandem bicycle.

There is consensus in the literature that family partnerships are a social construction, significantly influenced by factors at all layers of the ecological system, including policy priorities, culture, beliefs and attitudes (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Fenech et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Cutshaw et al. (2022) and Wolf (2020) call for further research mechanisms for engaging with families. Wolf (2020) found that educators and families had differing expectations of roles. With curriculum frameworks often failing to provide clarity, the ambiguous interpretation and lack of tangible guide to enacting family collaboration weakens educator and family relationships (Gross et al., 2019), just like having the seats assembled to close, or too far away for rider use.

Educators and families are equally in need of an instruction manual for the tandem bicycle of collaborative partnerships in ECEC. Kambouri et al. (2021) reaffirm existing literatures' depiction of components that support collaborative partnerships (for example, shared values and working as equals). It could be said that Kambouri et al. (2021), have seemingly identified the parts of the tandem bicycle, contributed to an instruction manual to build it, but unfortunately have fallen short in offering a guide for how to ride it.

Instructions for Riding a Tandem Bicycle

Riding a bike is complex, with a multitude of possibilities on exactly how to ride the tandem bicycle. One of the first decisions is where to sit on the bike and interpreting the instructions. Drawing on the literature, the authors offer refinements to existing conceptualisations of family-educator relationships and propose new ways of thinking about how to ride the collaborative partnerships bicycle. A series of steps are identified linking the tandem bicycle metaphor to the synthesised points that have emerging from the literature.

Step 1 – Negotiating Who Sits Where

Vying for seating position on the tandem bicycle surfaces in the literature where there is tension, and negation around stakeholder expertise and child knowledge; the family who know their child best and is paying for a service (Almendingen et al., 2021), versus the professional educator who studies child development (Owen et al., 2000). Fenech et al. (2019) call for professional advocacy to shift the image of family and educator in their partnership away from a consumer-service model to a child-centered, goal-oriented cohesive relationship. This perspective offers educators an opportunity to build families' understandings of

partnerships (Murphy et al., 2021), and evidence the value in educator-family partnerships.

Within the literature the construct of negotiation is linked to the notion of empowerment. For example, Laletas et al. (2017) acknowledge the capabilities of the families as knowledgeable, active, and equal participants in decision making. Further literature (Forry et al., 2011) draws into question whether families are provided an equal 'seat' in negotiations. Rouse (2012) suggests a model of partnership for engaging and collaborating with families in a manner where the focus is on shared empowerment resulting in positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Tightly coupled with the concept of partnerships are family centred practices which are seen as imperative in the ECEC (Dunst et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2018) as a way of empowering families. The literature review reveals that equal and balanced negotiation, like two equal sized seats on a tandem bicycle, are required for the notion of empowerment.

Step 2 – Steering and Setting the Direction for the Ride

Having successfully negotiated seating positions, the riders of the tandem bicycle (the family and educators) realise that irrespective of where they sit, they are empowered in decision making. Next is to steer the bicycle in a set direction. The literature suggests that setting a direction and steering to negotiate empowered relationships involves removing an economic/consumer-oriented view of a family's utilisation of ECEC services, to a position of a truly shared direction (Fenech et al., 2019). The empirical research by Murphy et al. (2021) surveyed 318 educators and 265 parents across Australia and found conflicting opinions on the real or perceived impact of power relations between families and educators in this approach. Educators concerned that advocacy could be misconstrued as confronting or dictating top-down communication by the educator to the family, therefore impeding relationships (Fenech et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). Fenech et al. (2019) considered the risk in educators acquiescing to family expectations to be equally as damaging as an authoritarian approach by an educator in decaying opportunities to build family understanding. What emerges from the literature is a gap, where Vuorinen (2020) suggests more research is needed, as currently the perception of power is dominant in family focused research findings of barriers to building effective partnership practices. The literature illuminates a problem, with these barriers being akin to a glitch in the fluidity of the bicycle's steering. With an impediment to the ability to steer the direction will go awry.

Togher and Fenech (2020) observed that higher qualifications equated to greater educator capacity in initiating

and facilitating quality improvements. This was supported by Fenech et al. (2019) finding higher qualified educators to be proactive in partnering with families, working with more focused intentionality towards families perceived needs. Vuorinen (2020) highlighted an asymmetric relationship that both educators and families grapple with in the ECEC context. Interestingly, Cutshaw et al. (2022) explored the mechanisms of family engagement in America, where a key finding was that irrespective of qualification level, a non-authoritarian educator was associated with higher partnership behaviours and family engagement, supporting an allegiance with earlier findings of the same by Owen et al. (2000).

Power in relationships can present differently. The intersection of this poignant research presented above suggests that higher qualified educators have a greater capacity to positively impact collaborative partnerships with families, only when the educator relinquishes their perception of self as expert authoritarian to create an open relationship on which to build elements of collaborative partnerships, such as trust, reciprocity, shared decision making. Moving towards relational and participatory behaviours underpin trusting and respectful relationships fundamental to empowerment (Laletas et al., 2017; Rouse, 2012). Perhaps the educator offering the family the front seat, and the ability to steer the tandem bicycle on their first journey would achieve this. Shifting perceptions of communication and engagement between families and educators towards a horizontal (rather than vertical) framing, goes someway to resolving barriers to empowered collaborative partnerships (Alasuutari, 2010).

In learning environments, engagement manifests itself in exercising agency. Much like two riders negotiating the direction on a tandem bicycle, reflexive deliberations prioritise the course of action amongst stakeholders (Kahn, 2014). Reflexivity allows for a person to understand their way of seeing the world, by considering how their own background and values shape their perspective (Skukauskaite et al., 2022). Armed then with this inward knowledge, a person can more effectively collaborate outwardly in a co-constructive relationship that embraces a variety of worldviews (Berger, 2015). Facilitating highly effective collaborative partnerships, stakeholders articulate and realise aims, where mutual objectives are counterbalanced, increasing the tolerance and capacity of stakeholders (Kahn, 2014). Mutual learnings evolve into joint truths and direction as Polk and Knutsson (2008) imply that the consensus towards these truths is gained through reflexive practices. Baumber et al. (2020) state "reflexivity plays a central role in transcending knowledge 'silos' to achieve new collective learning" (p. 396). Families and educators increase each other's competencies and expertise as they alternate seating

positions on the tandem bicycle. The process fosters the co-construction of new knowledge (Polk & Knutsson, 2008). It incites mutual learning that allows for the harnessing of power imbalances in a positive light (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). This change in positioning allows for the continuation toward a common goal when there is an unequal weight contributed by one party, or the constant shifting of power in a fluid and reflexive environment.

Step 3 – Pedaling and Maintaining Momentum

To pedal a bike, a circular type of motion is used in a way where force is applied on the pedals throughout the pedal stroke. Like this motion, the literature surfaces reflexive practice, which occurs continually in the learning process. In this metaphor, the direction of travel reflecting the capacity to facilitate strength in the pedalling motion, creating momentum for the trajectory of the tandem bicycle, will also reflect the interchanging role of expert between family and educator.

In ECEC services, this type of practice would manifest a fluid and interchanging reliance on the strengths of both the educator and the family, each contributing to the shared objectives for the child. The literature reinforces the importance of the genuine acceptance of the shifting of *knowledgeable expert* between the educator and family create opportunities for shared support. For example, Vlasov and Hujala (2017) three country comparative study emphasised the need for a multi-perspective view of the child, rather than a shared vision, giving strength to the unique aspects [of child or situation] as seen by each stakeholder.

Highlighting family-centred and strengths-based practices, sees families as competent experts, where their position as their child's first educator is celebrated. Sheridan et al. (2019) calls for future studies to consider both family and educator opportunities to voice beliefs and attitudes, rather than existing research that considers the perceptions of stakeholders by others. Being somewhat analogous, each of the riders of this tandem bicycle should be afforded the opportunity to share their experience of the journey for themselves, irrespective of their seating position or pedalling capacity at any given time. Kambouri et al. (2021) UK based findings championed this positioning through the development of their CAFÉ model. In the metaphor, riding is therefore an image of the fluid, responsive and everchanging constructs in the family-educator dyad of collaborative partnerships.

Given collaborative partnerships are valued for their attainment of problem-solving goals, is it possible for this tandem bicycle to be just the vehicle to create the successful momentum needed in ECEC for families and educators alike? This type of thinking offers continued momentum

towards a shared goal, where the role of knowledgeable expert is fluid and constantly shifting, supporting both stakeholders. Reinforcing a strength-based initiative, grounded in an ecological framework, this shared support can be considered through illustration of the tandem bicycle metaphor in Fig. 2.

Riding in Tandem Shared Support

Working together (i.e., in tandem) enhances collaborative partnerships. The post-test results of a UK study by Kambouri et al. (2021) showcased stakeholders developing more empathetic and empowering approaches towards their counterparts as their valuing of collaborative partnership engagement increased. This was similar to an Australian study by Fenech et al. (2019) that evidenced the success of collaborative partnerships as the intentionality of educator and family's engagement increased. There are two riders of this tandem bicycle: the family, and the educator. Each is unique, and brings with them a variety of strengths (Hadley & Rouse, 2018), knowledge of the child (Brown, 2019), and an underlying set of values and expectations (Phillipson, 2017). Impediments to successful partnerships were surfaced in an American study by Haines et al. (2022), where refugee families and educators had positive intentions to collaborate, but their assumptions of the other hindered outcomes. In an effort to decolonise power imbalanced ways of working towards successful collaborative partnerships, West et al. (2022) embraced an awareness of First Peoples' cultural safety practices that lead to greater cultural humility and engagement of stakeholders. Encompassing these notions, Baumber et al. (2020) highlighted the transdisciplinary nature of collaborative partnerships, where a reflexive process of mutual learning facilitated enhanced and diverse worldviews. Therefore, irrespective of seating position, the trajectory is already established and communicated as a shared goal.

Referring to the metaphor of the tandem bicycle, the representation of reflexivity (as shown in Fig. 2) is in the chain, which moves fluidly and connects with the cogs (Berger, 2015; Skukauskaite et al., 2022). The pedals, which support the rider to push and propel in motion, are symbolic of shared support, and the unison of reflexivity together with support highlight the image of pedalling in tandem. Most crucial to this metaphor is the inference that it is possible to successfully ride the bicycle, in the agreed direction, without equal contribution of the members.

Where an imbalance of pedal force exists, such as the inability to pedal in a particular situation, the bike can absorb some loss of momentum, if balance is still in place. The unique design of a tandem bicycle allows for one or

both of the parties to contribute to the momentum forward, regardless of their seating position. Tandem bicycles permit for two riders to pedal in unison, with equal effort, or for one party to 'shadow' pedal, undertaking the motion but contributing with less strength. Alternatively, one rider can pedal while the other freewheels. The visual image of the tandem bike embraces the fluid changes in motion and momentum that surface within the literature.

Akin to this would be when the family supports the educator in understanding contextual influences on a child, for example, providing an understanding of the diverse home life of a child. In this instance, the family pedals while the educator continues to participate in the pedalling motion, supporting the forward momentum, whilst providing for the capacity and agency of the family to flourish in this opportunity. Conversely, the educator may take sole control of pedalling in providing the child with explicit modelling of empathetic practices if this is not identified as a strength of the family, whilst valued as necessary in contributing to the shared support towards positive outcomes for the child. In this instance, the family may simply shadow the pedalling motion, or tuck their feet up and cheer on the educator, not having the ability to impact the momentum, but remaining on the bicycle and steering towards the agreed upon goal. As long as the bicycle keeps moving, from the fluid nature of those promoting its momentum, then the tandem shared support of educator and family towards positive outcomes for children are maintained.

Key Findings

Several key findings have emerged from a review of the literature and use of metaphor to support the process of meaning making.

1. The use of a metaphor was effectual in conceptualising, interrogating, and presenting the literature review and aided in reorganising patterns of thinking. Using metaphor supported the researcher (i.e., Author One) in making sense of the complexities that arose from the literature regarding approaches to collaborative partnerships.
2. Furthermore, it afforded an explanatory medium for colleagues (i.e., Authors Two and Three) so they could form a cognitive picture of linkages, connections and complexities within the literature presented. This in turn provided opportunities for deeper metacognitive processing of the content, whilst further enhancing the conceptualisation of the metaphor itself.
3. The metaphor communicates the scholarly findings of the narrative literature review in a visual, tangible and

identifiable way for a broader audience and readership. This includes challenging existing thinking akin to viewing educator-family partnerships as similar to the seesaw metaphor, to engaging with alternative and contemporary rhetoric that conceptualises successful collaborative partnerships as more like themes associated with the metaphor of the *tandem bicycle*.

4. Finally, the paper offers a unique contribution to the conceptualisation and presentation of literature reviews using metaphor. Utilised here to facilitate sense-making of the tensions, dilemmas, and complexities that not only arising in the literature, but at the theory/practice nexus also. The transferability of using metaphor in this way supports scholars in navigating meaning making in literature reviews through a deep, reflexive, and unique approach.

Conclusion

This literature review sought to show the usefulness of metaphor as an evolutionary knowledge process to provide insight, and connections of concepts, politicising, and surfacing tensions arising within literature related to collaborative partnerships. The use of the tandem bicycle metaphor was a visual image that captured the 'mediation' between mind and culture, transforming knowledge and practices, which is vitally in a knowledge society. What emerges through the use of metaphor and narrative review presented here is a need to reflect the value of a shared understanding more deeply, as well as the roles and expectations for stakeholders in collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings.

The review also recognises that while there is significant research and literature that offers insights into understandings of collaborative partnerships broadly (Vuorinen, 2020) opportunities remain to further explore and investigate this phenomenon (Almendingen et al., 2021) including exemplary interactions that occur at the coalface (Murphy et al., 2021). What is evident is that the ECEC sector would benefit from a streamlining of the myriad of collaborative partnership models influencing their practices (Coelho et al., 2018). These types of insights would go some way in filling the gap in existing research and conceptualise a *how to* guide, giving voice to both the educator and the family on the tandem bicycle of collaborative partnerships (Petrovic et al., 2019).

Author Contributions Kathryn Mason: Conceptualization; Methodology; Software; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Resources; Data curation; Project administration; Supervision; Visualization; Methodology; Analysis; Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing; Visualization; Supervision; Project administration. Dr Alice Brown: Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing; Visualization. Dr Susan Carter: Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing; Vi-

sualization.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflict of Interest There was no funding associated with this research project. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of University of Southern Queensland. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee (01/07/2021 and No. H21REA115). Informed voluntary consent was obtained from all participants.

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3.3. Links and Implications

This paper adds to the existing body of literature and research on collaborative partnerships in early childhood education and care in numerous ways. Firstly, the article brings to light international perspectives on the value and positioning of families and educators in collaborative partnership efforts and illuminates the opportunities for further research to fill the void of observational studies that harness multiple stakeholder voices. A streamlining of the multitude of terms and models of collaborative partnerships offers an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of these interactions.

Furthermore, this publication contributes nuanced thinking around the use of metaphor as a manner by which to organise and articulate sense making processes when seeking clarity around conceptual complexities. The key findings propose a tangible and visual offering of the tandem bicycle by which researchers and practitioners can conceptualise collaborative partnerships between educators and families in ECEC.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The key intent of this study was to investigate understandings of collaborative partnerships by undertaking research within ECEC services that evidenced examples of exemplary collaborative partnerships, determined by their attainment of an “exceeding” rating against the NQS (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). From within these high-quality settings, a further goal of this inquiry was to observe stakeholders’ (educator and family) interactions and obtain their perspectives of experiencing collaborative partnerships. In exploring these experiences, it was envisaged that findings would reveal components that fostered collaborative partnership practices and how these were actualised in the field.

Literature reviewed (Chapter 2) and the published article (Chapter 3) revealed an opportunity to consider the mechanisms by which collaborative partnerships are enacted, and the roles that stakeholders play in creating and maintaining these. Existing research reinforced a paucity of observational techniques in collaborative partnership investigations (Almendingen et al., 2021; Vuorinen, 2020) and the need for future studies to harness stakeholder voice (Kambouri et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2019). Illumination of these gaps motivated a deep consideration of the research design and methodological considerations that were required to best understand the phenomenon for this study.

Chapter Four now addresses and provides details regarding the methodologies and methodological considerations employed to best explore and gain insights into collaborative partnership in ECEC services, and in doing so inform the associated research questions for this inquiry. The chapter starts by detailing the research paradigm and philosophical orientations for the study. This is followed by

providing a justification for adopting case study as the best fit for gathering data to best inform the research questions.

Details regarding participants of the study and data collection tools are then outlined, before rationalising the employment a novel participatory approach to Situational Analysis (SA) (Clarke, 2003, 2005) for both data collection and analysis. This chapter culminates with considerations of the role of the researcher, ethical deliberations, assumptions, and limitations.



Researcher Memo:

As an early doctoral candidate, I considered what methodology might best suit my investigation of the phenomenon. I presented to my supervisors my summation on the pros and cons of each of Yin, Merriam, or Stake's case study designs, highlighting their strengths and alignment with my underpinning beliefs about knowledge and meaning. I was abruptly faced with a quandary by two words from my supervisory team "But why?" These two words led me down a rabbit hole, and inevitably shaped this study's design. You see, that day my supervisors and I discussed the poststructural nature of contemporary learning. The deep seated and exceptionally valid works of Yin, Merriam and Stake have forefronted case study methodology for a significant period of time. However, Alice (my Principal Supervisor) said "perhaps you challenge this thinking?". I spent the next month considering poststructuralism. And the deeper I dug, the more entrenched the idea became and encapsulated my study and associated methodological strategies for data collection.

4.2. Research Paradigm

Careful consideration was given to the research paradigm chosen for this study. The selection of a research paradigm needed to align not only with the researcher's own ontological and epistemological assumptions, but also offer "a best fit" by which to investigate the research problem. These decisions were critical as they would inform and guide the course of action for the investigation, based on a clear set of beliefs and values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Therefore, the cohesiveness of this study's qualitative design was of importance.

Dominant paradigms in research broadly encompass positivist, interpretive and critical domains (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative designs that offered the opportunity to make sense of the lived experiences of stakeholders resonated with the intentions of this study. Yet, at the same time an overarching critical lens (Huutoniemi et al., 2010; Kalenda, 2016) offered an interdisciplinary approach for considering the multiple truths of each stakeholder in expressing and presenting their lived experience for this study.

What emerged from the scrutiny of research paradigms, was the decision to adopt a multilayered approach that harnessed the messy complexities (Clarke, 2003, 2005) of the research situation. A poststructural research design was chosen as the core principles of this domain. It was anticipated that this approach would facilitate the goals of this study by affording for multiple and nuanced perspectives to be collected through diverse methods, specifically through a Foucauldian lens.

4.2.1. A Foucauldian Poststructural Lens

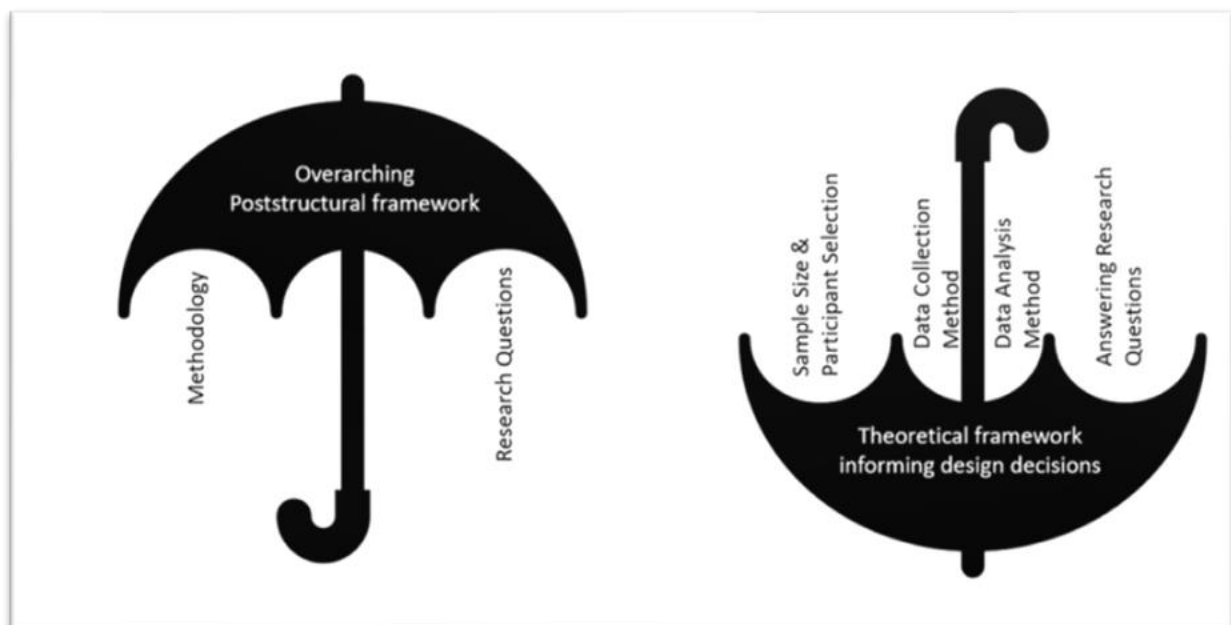
Aligning with a strong theoretical lens helped inform and guide decision making around all aspects of the research design (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 1990). This study adopted a Foucauldian poststructural framework (See Figure 4.1, An

Overarching Framework). An overarching framework is depicted by the umbrella (on the left) and encompasses the design decisions around methodology and the research questions. Using this framework also informed design decisions as an upside-down umbrella (on the right) as if these were raindrops being collected.

Allowing for a flexible design that supported the deep exploration of discursive relationships, this framework enabled the consideration of how perception, power/knowledge relations, and context shaped the phenomenon (Foucault, 1980; Mohammed et al., 2015). The poststructural tenets of multiple truths from diverse perspectives resonated with this study's intention to capture multiple stakeholder experiences. Developing a strong framework and methodology allowed for the capturing of data pertinent to the outcomes of this study whilst aligning with the researcher's philosophical orientations.

Figure 4.1

An Overarching Framework



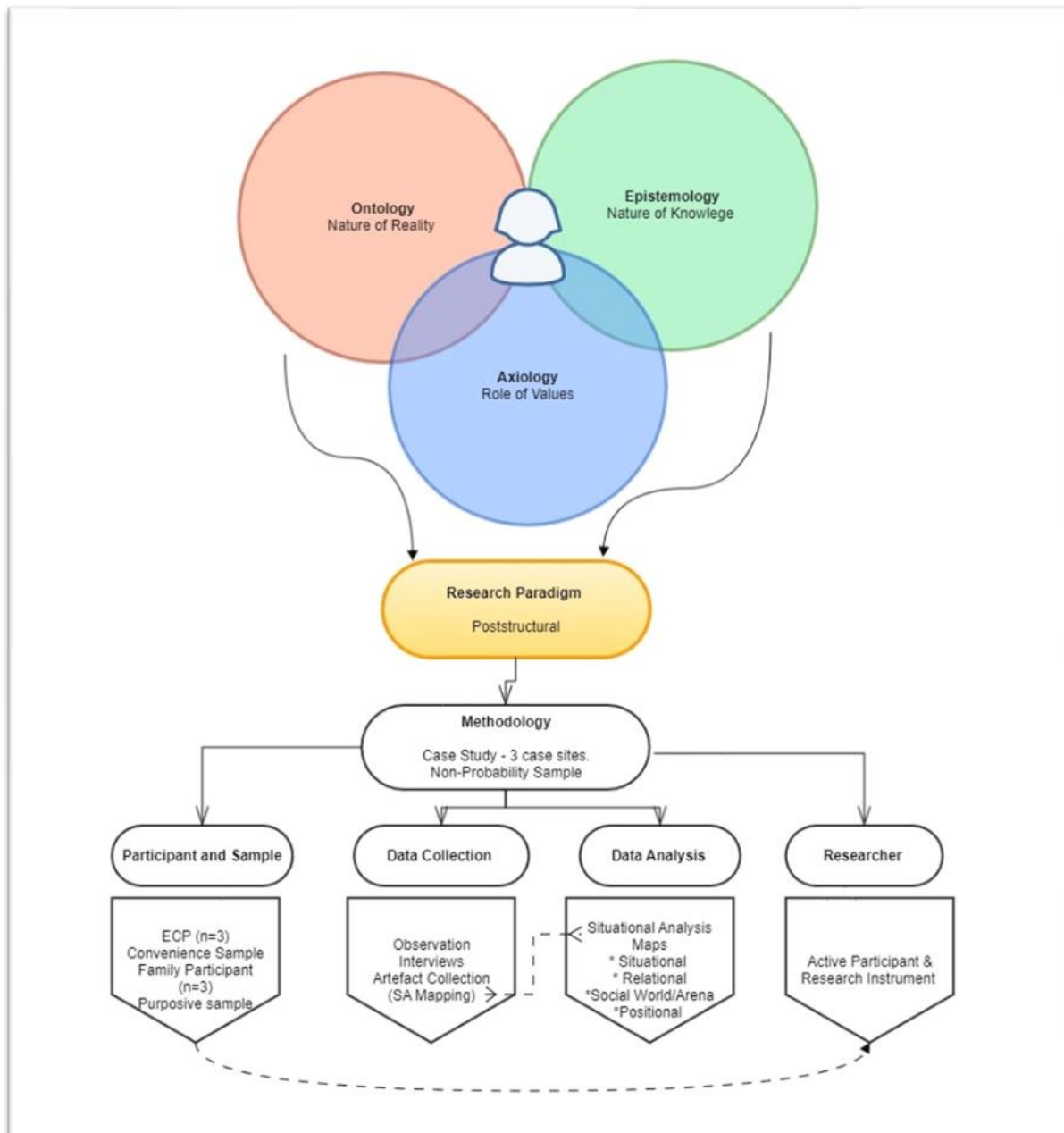
4.3. Philosophical Orientation

The philosophical orientations of the researcher comprise of one's position on the nature of knowledge (epistemology), beliefs around reality (ontology), and the ethical and value judgements held (axiology). Described by seminal authors in research design as a framework (Creswell, 2018), theoretical underpinning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), or perspective (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), the underlying philosophical orientation provides for an understanding of how the world works from diverse perspectives. This study's poststructural orientations illuminated multiple truths and realities, allowing for a multilayered consideration of complex interrelationships between the research situation, participants, and the data itself to surface. Interactions between elements of the research, including participants and their environment, afforded for the co-construction of knowledge as the phenomenon was interpreted by the meanings people brought to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The philosophical orientations of the researcher aligned with the research paradigm, giving strength to the research design, seen in Figure 4.2, Philosophical and Paradigmatic Alignment of the Study. Depicted in this figure is a representation of how the researcher's philosophical and paradigmatic alignment informed subsequent research design decisions. Coherence afforded by this approach provided a rigour to the entirety of the research process, and ensured consistency to the manner in which the investigation was conducted, and how the data was viewed.

Figure 4.2

Philosophical and Paradigmatic Alignment of the Study



4.3.1. Epistemology

The study of knowledge, what constitutes it, and how it is produced and transferred forms our epistemological beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). A researcher's beliefs about the nature and production of knowledge permeates the manner in which their study of a phenomenon is conducted (Yazan, 2015).

Investigating from an emic epistemological positioning, this study considered how systematic influences on stakeholders and their experiences interacted to inherently influence the construction of knowledge, cognisant of multiple perspectives. Stake (1995) wrote “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented” (p. 108).

Undertaking research from this epistemological stance allowed for an investigation from the perspective of the participant, where the researcher sought to make visible the multiple truths of those living the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. From a Foucauldian perspective, there is no one absolute truth, knowledge is contextual, unstable, and ever evolving (Foucault, 1973) as a product of discourse from the narratives that shift and change. This study’s design embraced this perspective and subsequent methodological choices enabled these truths to be demonstrated.

4.3.2. *Ontology*

Interwoven with epistemology, the ontological lens of the researcher considers their beliefs about reality and the influence of such on a study’s design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldana et al., 2011). The qualitative assumptions of this study aligned with the words of Merriam (1998) who wrote that “reality is not an objective entity; rather there are multiple interpretations of reality” (p. 22). Further supported by Stake’s (1995) position that researchers “construct not discover” knowledge (p. 99). A relativist ontological positioning of this study valued a co-construction of meaning as being mediated through people’s subjective interpretations of the social world. Meaning was considered to be impacted by contextual factors at a multitude of systematic levels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that

therefore enabled multiple realities and multiple meanings to co-exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

4.3.3. Axiology

Axiology is concerned with the nature and theory of ethics and value judgement. It underpins why research is conducted in a particular manner. Of significance in studies such as this project, where meaning is co-constructed, the authenticity and trustworthiness of the researcher and the research process must be forefronted towards evidencing trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Poststructurally, a consciousness of discourse is imperative; meaning it is essential to recognise that discursive deconstructions mean different things to different people (Dudley et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2016).

As an example, axiology speaks to the alignment of values in collaborative partnerships. When multiple stakeholders interpret discourse, harnessing the power of their diverse worldviews adds depth and strength to the outcomes of the partnership. In this study, the reflexive nature of each participants contribution mirrored the axiological perspective of valuing a shared relationship and co-construction of knowledge. Given this, it was important that the study authentically championed participant voices and experiences. This was achieved through collaborative situational analysis mapping (data collection and analysis, detailed further in this chapter) that supported these values (Clarke, 2005; Hadley & Rouse, 2019; Kalenda, 2016). SA was utilised for its consideration of complex social conditions and influence (Clarke, 2005), encompassing the entirety of “the situation” (discussed later in analysis section).

The decision to adopt a qualitative research design is reiterated here as the qualitative approach enabled the discovery of participant perspectives in their own

words, through data collection techniques such as semi-structured interviews, and observations that occurred in the natural environment of everyday life (Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2022). A poststructural lens allowed for the disruption of assumptions in the data (Clarke, 2019). Pairing this lens with a qualitative design devoid of prescriptive methods offered flexibility towards revealing multiple realities.

Situatedness of the researcher was embraced in the qualitative design of this study (Ademolu, 2023). There was a purposeful alignment of the researcher's philosophical orientations with the poststructural research paradigm. These priorities supported the purpose of this study and were the best fit for the type of data and findings that the study aimed to gather, towards answering the research questions. Being grounded firmly in this approach provided consistency to the lens through which this investigation was conducted.

4.4. A Case for Case Study

A strong qualitative methodological approach to gathering data as part of this inquiry was employing a single case study with multiple case sites. Typically, the road map to constructing a case study would be dictated by an allegiance to Yin, Merriam, or Stake's designs. However, in developing a poststructural case study the decision was made to select the most appropriately aligned of these seminal works. In doing so, the intent was to align with the research paradigm and philosophical orientations that harnessed the strengths of case study towards answering the research questions.

Rosenberg and Yates (2007) offer case study as an opportunity that is "not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position" (p. 447). Harrison et al. (2017) supports the notion that case study provides agnostic and practical versatility, enabling the flexible design warranted for this project. In

considering case study for this project, it was appreciated that case study offered a pragmatic view of knowledge that elevated the complexities of life (Thomas, 2019), aligning with the underpinning poststructural orientations of the phenomenon being investigated.

Affording an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives, case study's holistic methodological approach supported the interconnected nature of social investigations, exposing the uniqueness of the real-life context (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021; Thomas, 2019). Case study became the "bridge across paradigms" as described by Luck et al. (2006, p. 103). Challenging westernised, modernist ways of knowing, the poststructural assumptions of this research design considered relationships between power, knowledge, truth, and discourse that permeated understandings of how knowledge was produced (Mather et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yazan, 2015). The impact of this on design decisions for this research project filtered through to include choices in data collection and analysis methods, that will be discussed shortly.

Cohen et al. (2017) considered "multiple, sometimes contradictory, yet coexistent interpretations of the world" as distinguishing marks of postmodern thought (p. 24). Breaking away from its structuralist predecessors, the divergence of poststructural scholarship's flexible design meant there was no prescribed recipe, conceptual framework, or form guide for its enactment in this research (Mather et al., 2017). Making an ideal choice for this project, it was decided that case study design would enable the investigation of the phenomenon in an environment where the context and subject were blurred (Yin, 2014). The intertwined nature of the phenomenon and its context blur the boundaries to its investigation, particularly in case studies conducted through lived experience (Mohammed et al., 2015; Yin,

2014). Combining a poststructural lens with a case study design allowed for both insightful and intricate consideration of “how” social, economic, and cultural systems influenced a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Mather et al., 2017; Thomas, 2019).



Researcher Memo:

The continual interjection of the research paradigm through the literature review, and the consideration of the data (how it is collected, analysed, and presented), impacted the study’s overall design. This non-linear approach resonates with the poststructural nature of the case study undertaken for this inquiry and Yin’s (2004) blurring of boundaries between context and subject. Foucault, one of the ultimate poststructuralist thinkers said:

“We must abandon hope of ever seeing “the big picture”, the whole truth, and remain content to recognise multiple axes of meaning forming a “polyhedron of intelligibility” (Foucault, 1980).

Figure 4.3

A Polyhedron



4.4.1. Bringing it Together

A poststructural case study design was of value for this study's deep exploration of a relatively bounded phenomenon (Mohammed et al., 2015). This "boundedness" served as a reminder of the focus of the research and the intent to generate data towards answering the research questions. While Stake (2005) approached a case as having boundaries and operational part, Yin (2014) conceptual blurring of subject and context in case study aligns more with the poststructural notions of a phenomenon being shaped by a vastness of influences.

In this study's design, the bounded system was ECEC services rated as exceeding the NQS, within which collaborative partnerships between educators and families operated. For poststructuralists, truth and reality are not fixed constructs, rather they are a formulation of ideas in a state of perpetual flux created through dominant narratives. The ever-changing nature of these truths from a poststructural perspective were aptly described by Andrews (2022) as "endlessly proliferating meaning, potentially, all coexisting in a sort of epistemological soup" (para. 5).

Knowledge and meaning making are influenced by a variety of cultural, political, and economic values, attitudes and assumptions that culminate as one's position, and way of being, in the world. Poststructuralist orientations theorise "that knowledge, objects, individuals and relationships have multiple meanings that shift with various contexts" (Mohammed et al., 2015, p. 101). The fragmented nature of complex social phenomenon, such as collaborative partnerships, can be celebrated through the pursuit and discovery of multiple truths of those living the experience (Kalenda, 2016; Martin et al., 2016). As demonstrated earlier in the Figure 4.2 *Philosophical and Paradigmatic Alignment of the Study*, the flexible and reflexive

design of this case study was heavily influenced by the poststructural theoretical lens.

4.5. Design of the Study

A review of the literature provided in Chapter Two, together with the conclusions drawn in the publication *Capturing the Complexities of Collaborative Partnership in Early Childhood Through Metaphor* (Chapter Three) evidenced a need to investigate how collaborative partnerships were actualised in the field. To provide a strengths-based perspective to answer the research questions, services rated as exceeding the NQS were approached to participate in this study. The goal in doing so was to reveal and explicate the interactions that evidenced successful collaborative partnerships and how the stakeholders describe their experiences of these.

4.5.1. Human Ethics Approval

Human ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of Southern Queensland on 1 July 2021, approval number H21REA115. This approval reflects efforts to detail and consider ethical interactions in respectful and participatory ways. Palaiologou and Brown (2023) discuss the need for qualitative studies' ethical considerations to move beyond institutional mandates to additionally bring into focus nontraditional approaches. Bolstering this approach Brown (2019) found being a "good guest" relied on the interpersonal capabilities of the researcher to build a rapport and trust with participants. This essential but fragile relationship exposes numerous complexities in working with stakeholders, particularly in early childhood settings. In this study, these broader ethical considerations played a part in the overall study design. The embedded nature of the participatory researcher and

data collection were all viewed through an ethical lens to ensure a transparency of the chosen methodological approach.

4.5.2. Participants and Sample

A non-probability sample was utilised to select the early childhood services to participate in this study (Cohen et al., 2017). This entailed emailing all 308 Long Day Care (LDC) ECEC Services rated Exceeding in both QA1 and QA6 of the NQS in Queensland, Australia (August, 2022), and inviting them to partake in the research project (see communication in Appendix B). Of these, eight services accepted the initial invitation to discuss the project further.

Table 4.1

Initial ECEC Service Respondents

	Service Name	Governance	Suburb	Ch
A	Great Kids Early Learning	Private not for profit other organisations	Regional	53
B	Gumnut Child Care	Private not for profit community managed	Inner City	50
C	Tall Timbers Child Care	Private not for profit other organisations	Metro	60
D	Happy Childrens Centre 1	Private for profit	Metro	181
E	Happy Childrens Centre 2	Private for profit	Inner City	129
F	Indigo House	Private not for profit other organisations	Inner City	175
G	Mountain Kids 1	Private for profit	Metro	151
H	Mountain Kids 2	Private for profit	Regional	99

Note: Initial eight services whom responded to participate in study. Psudonyms used to provide anonymity.

Of the initial eight services that responded three services chose to participate. Of the five that chose not to participate the following factors impacted on their decision:

- Four private for-profit services were owned by two providers (Services D & E, Provider 4; Services G & H, Provider 6). In the initial discussion phase, each provider was offered the opportunity to select one site for the researcher to visit. This was done as it was considered that services operated by the same owners,

receiving the same rating would result in similar outcomes. To avoid excessive duplication these were reduced.

- After multiple Zoom meetings with Provider 4, (operator of Services D & E) the researcher awaited a decision as to their preference site for the study and suitable days to visit. The Provider failed to reply and as such neither service proceeded with the study participation.
- Service C responded to the initial interest email but failed to confirm a day and time to meet online to discuss in more detail the proposed study and consider participation further.
- Service A began the study. Site visits were conducted including observations and initial interviews. Due to workforce pressures impacting classroom staffing and the unexpected relocation of the focus family, this service was removed from the study as they were unable to support the study through to conclusion.

As a result of the above, the following three services participated in the final study.

Table 4.2

Final Participant ECEC Services

	Service Name	Governance	Suburb	No of Chn
B	Gumnut Child Care	Private not for profit community managed	Inner City	50
F	Indigo House	Private not for profit other organisations	Inner City	175
H	Mountain Kids 2	Private for profit	Regional	99

Note: Final participants services. Pseudonyms used for anonymity.

Once services were engaged, the Centre Directors and Educational Leaders were more deeply informed of the study and its goals via Zoom meetings and emails. Service leaders then organised for the researcher to attend and observe. Families and Educators were provided with information regarding the researcher's visit, the intentions of the research project and request for their consent to participate

(Appendix C). The researcher was afforded access to the early childhood services during peak drop off and pick up times, with settings including the foyer/administration area, outdoor playground, and classroom spaces.

Convenience sampling was employed to select one educator within each service ($N=3$). Purposive sampling of one parent participant from each service ($N=3$) then ensued, with the researcher observing collaborative partnership interactions between participant educators and families during the drop off and pick up routines (See Table 4.3 for details of participants from each site). The selection of family participants occurred as a result of opportunistic events where the family member and educator evidenced collaborative partnership practices. The key focus was on their engagement and interaction, not on any particular demographic of educator or family (e.g., gender, sexuality, household makeup, qualification etc). As this study's intent was to deeply understand the phenomenon from the perspective of a specific sample of participants, there is no prevailing rule regarding sample size (Cohen et al., 2017; Patton, 1990). With a focus on detailed exploration of collaborative partnerships within these high-quality settings, the non-random and purposeful sample were chosen (Cohen et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 4.3

Participant details

Site	Parent	Educator
Gumnut Childcare*	Surish*	Chelsea*
	Parent to one child who attends the Nursery classroom	Diploma Qualified educator of 33 years, Nursery Educator & 2IC
Indigo House*	Dina*	Silvia*
	Parent to two children, one completed care at Indigo House and now at school, the other remains at the service in the Toddler class	Diploma Qualified educator of 5 years, Toddler Educator

	Naomi*	Martha*
Mountain Kids*	Parent to two children, one Pre-Kindy age and a newborn at home	Bachelor Qualified with 20 years' experience, Director & EDL

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity of participants

4.6. Data Collection

The literature review revealed the need for observational data from the field (Almendingen et al., 2021; Vuorinen, 2020), and the promotion of stakeholder (particularly parent) voice in considering collaborative partnerships in ECEC (Kambouri et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020). Therefore, these were essential motivating factors informing the study's research design. A variety of data collection methods sought to capture a diversity of interactions during the most frequent interactions between educators and families during routine drop off and pick up times in ECEC services. As both stakeholders shared in these routine interactions these times provided an ideal time for the researcher to make observations, and a source of lived experience of collaborative partnerships that gave stakeholders the opportunity to describe interactions, understanding and experiences in their own words.

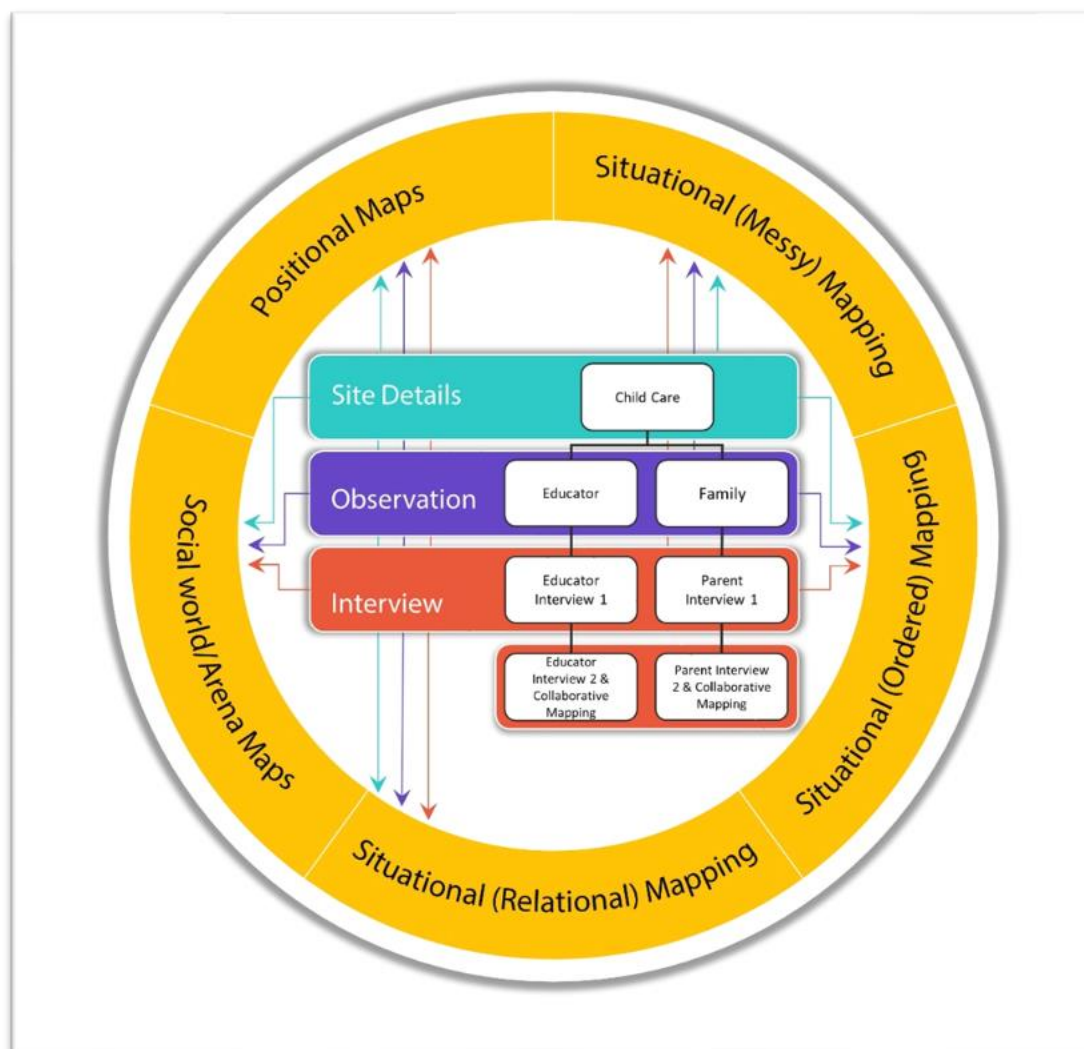
Multiple data sources were utilised for this case study and included observation, semi-structured interviews, and situational analysis mapping techniques. Within a poststructural case study the multifaceted approach to data collection helped to harness the investigation of numerous relationships (Mohammed et al., 2015). Each of the observations and interviews provided data that was drawn upon to make sense of this phenomenon. It is important to note here also, that these data collection methods also further informed the variety of situational maps that were developed concurrently throughout the research process as both data collection and analysis tools. A more thorough discussion of the use of situational

analysis follows shortly in Section 4.7 Simultaneous data collection and analysis using situational analysis.

The data collection process was carried out from September to December 2022, and began with participant observation followed by semi structured interviews and relational mapping with the educators ($n=3$) and families ($n=3$) as seen in Table 4.3. Situational analysis mapping occurred alongside the observations and interviews. Each of these data collection methods will now be addressed.

Figure 4.4

Contemporaneous Data Collection



Note. The image portrays the continual situational mapping phases that surround the artefact collection, observations, and interviews. Arrows extend from each

method inside the circle to depict how these maps are informed by and continue to evolve around these collective methods.

4.6.1. Participant Observation, and the Development and Use of the Situated Evidence Tool (SET)

Observations yield authentic and valid data, where encountering the phenomenon from within the situation allows the researcher to gather understandings of the physical, human, interaction, and organisational settings (Cohen et al., 2017). Observations have the ability to enhance the quality and interpretation of data (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). In this study, the respectful placement of researcher within the space allowed for the complex yet natural relationships between educators and families to surface uninterrupted (Patton, 1990). As a participant observer in this investigation, the researcher was required to balance her participation in the space, absorption of the situation, make notations with haste, while remaining detached enough to provide perspective (Merriam, 2016). Supported by an alignment with the study's poststructural paradigm and theoretical underpinnings, the capacity of the researcher's role as active participant in the space was maximised as she took part in daily life and typical routines, offering an opportunity to gain both explicit and tacit learnings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The critical reflexive practices the researcher undertook in this style of data collection were important considerations towards trustworthiness and are discussed in Section 4.9 later in this chapter.

Educator and families' interactions were observed at each ECEC service during the typical drop off and pick up routines over a one-week period. This took place at drop off (7-9am) and pick up (3-5pm) times. Educators and families were observed, with their knowledge and consent, but without intrusion by the researcher.

Positioned in a variety of locations throughout the ECEC services, the researcher witnessed an array of interactions without hindering the usual routines of participants. Examples of the observational environments included the administrative foyer, outdoor play space and indoor classrooms. The initial observations provided for background context, notations of body language, nonverbal and verbal communication, the child, the family, and interactions with service providers during drop off and pick up times.

These interactions were recorded utilising a framework of analysis, developed by the researcher. Unable to source an appropriate observation tool, the researcher cultivated and adapted the Situated Evidence Tool (SET). The observation tool needed to allow for quick but comprehensive notations that encompassed the *whole* of the research situation, but also align with the NQS QA6 standards and elements around collaborative partnerships. Inspiration was drawn from an adaption from the AEIOU observation framework (Figure 4.5) derived from Hanington and Martin (2012).

Figure 4.5

AEIOU Observational Tool

Activities	Environments	Interactions	Objects	Users

Note: Adapted from *AEIOU Observation Framework* by Hanington and Martin, 2012, Quarto Publishing Group (<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.usq.edu.au/lib/USQ/detail.action?docID=3399583>).

This observational tool afforded a widened lens to better appreciate the *entire research situation* and factors that influenced the phenomenon. Observing from within, the researcher's real-time sharing in the culture of the setting enabled additional tacit aspects to come to life through this data collection method. These

tacit aspects are described by anthropologists and social scientists as what happens outside of one's consciousness (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) and include a sense of self and other's beliefs, assumptions and perspectives that might otherwise be lost in interviews or focus groups. The SET provided an ideal wide-angle lens through which to consider both explicit and tacit learnings by detailing the activities, environment, interactions, objects, and users in a space. Overlaying the AEIOU framework was the QA6 Assessment and Rating Instrument. This Assessment and Rating Instrument (Figure 4.6) is utilised by Authorised Officers to rate services against the NQS (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2020). Given this study's centralised view around service ratings as an indicator of quality, it was important that the standards and elements of QA6 frame the observation tools lens on collaborative partnerships as they were being observed.

Figure 4.6

QA6 Assessment and Rating Instrument

Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities		
	Concept	Standard
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role
Element	Concept	Descriptor
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision-making about their child's learning and wellbeing.
6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.
Information from desktop review to follow up on during assessment and rating visit		✓
Notes from service QIP		

Note: From National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument, by ACECQA, 2020

(https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/NQS_AssessmentRatingInstrument.pdf).

The SET (Figure 4.7) was refined as an observation framework by the researcher to easily help in observing interactions between educators and families that evidenced collaborative partnerships in practice. This observational data highlighted how participants operated and engaged in the environment, as well as providing for notation of stakeholder interactions. Through the development of the SET a space was offered for contemplation of how additional elements in the research situation, such as objects and the environment impact the phenomenon. The SET is of value to the ECEC field as it offers a new tool by which to gain insight into the nuanced implications of these additional factors on interactions and relationships (Mohammed et al., 2015).

4.6.2. Interviews

In gathering information and understandings from and with participants, this study's design was purposeful in promoting participant perspectives and the rich value this added to the data collection. Semi structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were conducted with a relaxed and informal feel (Patton, 1990). Conducted within the ECEC participant services, interviews were face to face to encourage a free-flowing conversation where there was flexibility for clarification, and capacity to develop unexpected answers more deeply.

Two semi structured interviews were conducted with individual participants for approximately 30 minutes each, approximately two weeks apart. A flowing and open conversational style of discussion was enabled by the use of semi-structured interviews supporting participants in feeling safe and valued (Levitt et al., 2017). The first interviews were conducted as soon as possible following the observation of collaborative partnerships in action, often the next day. Interview questions centred

Figure 4.7

Situated Evidence Tool (SET)

Situated Evidence Tool (SET)				
Activities are goal-directed sets of actions—paths to accomplish. What are the modes people work in, and the specific activities and processes they go through?	Environments include the entire arena where activities take place. What is the character and function of the space overall, of each individual's spaces, and of shared spaces?	Interactions are between a person and someone or something else; they are the building blocks of activities. What is the nature of routine and special interactions between people, between people and objects in their environment, and across distances?	Objects are building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or unintended uses (thus changing their function, meaning and context). What are the objects and devices people have in their environments and how do they relate to their activities?	Users are the people whose behaviors, preferences, and needs are being observed. Who is there? What are their roles and relationships? What are their values and prejudices?
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role		
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.2	Collaborative Partnerships	Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing		
6.2.1	Transitions	Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.2	Access and participation	Effective partnership supports children's access, inclusion and participation in the program		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.3	Community engagement	The service builds relationships and engages with its community.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
What are people doing? What actions and behaviors are people taking to reach goals?	How are they using env? What role does environ play? What is the overall setting in which the activities are taking place? How are people	Do you see routines? Interactions between People and objects - What are the basic interactions occurring for people to reach goals? What effect do people have on activities and environment?	What is used and what is not? Describe engagement with object - Are there obstacles? What are all the details that form the environment? How do objects relate to people, activities and interactions?	Who? What are their roles? How defined? Who are the people being observed? What are their personalities like? How do they engage with other people to reach goals?

around recounting the observed interaction between educator and family and discussing the nature of participants experiences and descriptions of such interactions and relationships. Acting as an additional stimulus, the SET notations prompted discussions and guided questions in the subsequent semi structured interviews. Examples of research question are found in Appendix D. Initial interviews were recorded using a voice recorder mp4 and transcribed verbatim.

In the second meeting a fortnight later, the researcher and the participant recalled the first interview discussion and the interactions between participants. A process of member checking was undertaken as the researcher clarified that interpretations of initial interview transcripts were true and correct. As part of this, the researcher and participant collaboratively undertook relational mapping processes.

The collaborative discussion and relational mapping process involved participants delving into higher order thinking and complex reasoning as they were supported in constructing situation (relational) maps with the researcher. Details of the maps will be extrapolated further in section 4.7 on situational analysis. However pertinent to this discussion, the active nature of stakeholder's participation in the co-construction of these maps gave rise to the articulation of their voice. Each stakeholder's declaration of their experiences and understandings of collaborative partnerships were explicitly demonstrated as participants drew connections and relations between elements in the data, justifying their reasoning for each line they marked on the map.

Second round interviews produced artifacts, these being messy situation and relational maps (Appendix E). Photographs were taken and retained by the researcher, with the maps becoming both data collection and analysis materials

themselves. Discussions throughout the mapping process were also recorded and transcribed verbatim.

4.6.3. Artefact Collection

Several types of textual and visual data were collected for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) utilise the term *document* to refer to “a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 139). Inclusion of these artifacts supported the poststructural case study as “analysis of documents facilitates deeper examination of discourse and subjectivities in operation” (Mohammed et al., 2015, p. 105). Artifacts collected during the data collection phase of this study included the researchers journaling, situational maps created and co-constructed with participants, the memos from the mapping process, as well as service-based artifacts such as policies and procedures. These artefacts were of value as they informed the situational analysis mapping that was occurring in parallel to typical data collection observations and interviews.

4.7. Simultaneous Data Collection and Analysis Using Situational Analysis

It is necessary to preface at this juncture that situational analysis provides a simultaneous data collection and analysis tool. It is important that its name not detract from its value in the process of collecting and refining data from a variety of sources. Briefly, situational analysis is a cartographic approach, developed by Clarke (2003), with diversified applications across qualitative realms that has seen it employed as a theoretical and methodological framework (Kalenda, 2016). Chosen for use within this case study, SA helped uncover multiple truths through a cooperative and participatory opportunity between researcher and participants. The approach embraced the multitude of influences on the phenomenon allowing for the capturing of embedded relationships, human and non-human (Clarke, 2003, 2005),

that were complementary and competing (Martin et al., 2016). This interwoven connectedness aligned with the overarching intent of this study that sought to understand relationships and complexities in developing and fostering successful collaborative partnerships (Frost et al., 2010; Stake, 1995).

As previously noted, in this study the multiple data collection methods including observations, interviews, and co-constructed relational maps continued to inform the production of the situational, social world/arena and positional maps. Subsequently these maps became analytical tools towards answering the research questions.



Researcher Memo:

I discovered situational analysis in my reading around poststructurally oriented research studies. The central tenets of its interdisciplinary approach resonated with me, as did Clarke et al.'s (2018) co-constitutive link between theory and method. The celebration of the [whole] situation and the deep exploration of relational ecologies opened my eyes to an opportunity to expose multiple truths – of those in the lived experience – cognisant of human and non-human actors, environments, structure, institutions, politics, cultures and histories (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke et al., 2018; Meszaros et al., 2019).

In SAthe “entire research situation” is provided for in a holistic and interwoven approach. This conceptualisation of the research situation aligned with the poststructural research paradigm and the ontological positioning of the researcher. Clarke (2005) stated that “the conditions of the situation are in the situation. There is no such thing as context” (p. 71). All that encompasses the phenomenon is

considered to be the research situation. The entire research situation of this study is evidenced in the collection of maps that follow this section. With this all-inclusive view of the situation, in this project, using SA enabled the researcher to manage multiple sites instead of too narrowly conceiving the implications of the data from one participant or one experience (Grzanka, 2020; Martin et al., 2016). As this case study was undertaken across three case sites with a total of six participants, the SA approach meant that maps could be developed for each participant and interaction, but also afforded for a culmination of these to share the multiple voices of those who lived the experience of collaborative partnerships. The maps did not need to designate an alignment or contraction to group consensus, rather they offered an illumination of the multiple experience through a holistic and interwoven approach.

The breadth and depth, and therefore the value in a SA approach is the consideration of all collective elements (human, non-human, discourse, and systems) that shape and constitute the situation (examples of which can be seen in situational (ordered) maps in Section 4.7.3). Further nested arrangements of the situation (Martin et al., 2016) are fluid and reflexive, are designated for example, as permeable boundaries in the social world/arena maps in Section 4.7.5. These deeply interwoven consideration of relationships is one of the diverse strengths of SA compared to traditional research methods (Martin et al., 2016).

4.7.1. The Value of Situational Analysis

Utilising visual analytics, SA lends itself to collaborative research endeavours where mapping undertaken by the researcher and the participants elicits a deep manipulation of the data. The participatory opportunity for this inquiry helped to illuminate the diversity and complexities of participants experiences in relation to collaborative partnerships. Their multiple and simultaneous truths were laid out in the

maps. SA afforded for a consideration of how the phenomenon was taken up, resisted, or modified by gaining insight from the conditions, structures, processes, mechanisms and relationships (and the links between these) through iterative cartographic methods (Martin et al., 2016). Clarke and Charmaz (2019) promote the decolonising strength of SA as the mapping of human and non-human actors, elements and dominant discourses encourage a multitude of world views and ways of knowing. The opportunity for stakeholders to co-construct the relational maps as part of the data collection process achieved this decolonising objective of the method. Maps and transcripts of conversation during the collaborative mapping process brought to light the untarnished voice and world view of stakeholders.

In this study the process of cartographic mapping enabled the researcher to tease out and expose connections and relationships in data. Silences in the data were drawn from the maps as they are actively worked and reworked in an iterative process (Clarke & Charmaz, 2019; Clarke et al., 2016; Eastwood et al., 2016). It allowed for all actors, including those silenced or absent, inclusive of the “taken for granted or invisible, including power and privileged” (Grzanka, 2020, p. 5) to be the focus of an analytical gaze (Clarke et al., 2022). The active role of the researcher and the collaborative nature of the mapping with participants afforded for a deep connection with the data (discussed further in Section 4.7.5). While valuable, this added a layer of complexity in ensuring perspective and the implication of this proximity on trustworthiness (also discussed later in Section 4.9). Three styles of maps produced by this method: are 1) situational and relational maps; 2) social world/arena maps; and 3) positional maps. The discussion will now move to consider

each type of map and their purpose in exposing understandings of the data they represent.



Researcher Memo:

At this juncture I pondered the influence of each layer of a social ecological model as impacting the phenomenon of collaborative partnerships and the stakeholders. Bronfenbrenner et al. (2006) bioecological systems theory considers influences on a phenomenon at a micro, meso, macro & chrono system. However, Clarke's (2005) SA and its poststructural tenets move away from binary or hierarchical considerations of the same. The collective elements (human, nonhuman, social systems, discourse, political, economic, cultural, symbols) that influence and constitute the 'situation' in SA, enable a flexible approach to understanding a multilayered phenomenon. As I moved through the data collection and mapping processes I found myself conflicted, and tempted, to draw comparisons at a conceptual level here. Clarke (2005) herself wrote "here the macro/meso/micro distinctions dissolve in the presence/absence" (p. 72). What I resolved was that whilst the interaction I was investigating sat at the meso-system of an ecological system, the broader consideration of 'the situation' brought to light the relationships between empirical elements encountered or neglected (Grzanka, 2020).

It all goes on the maps – I can see the messy and relational situational maps developing in that way. But also, the social world/arenas with permeable boundaries and bi-directional relationships. What's more, the strength of SA's ability to draw out the silent data, the unseen, really resonates here in Clarke's words "presence/absence" and how these fit into the positional maps. It's all making sense. I see it holistically. The situation!

4.7.2. *Situational (Messy) Maps*

Using data drawn from interviews, observations and artefacts, the situational maps began as a messy “splat” of all elements of the situation, human and nonhuman, laid out on a large sheet of paper (see example Figure 4.8). With no preconception as to where these elements were placed, the researcher provoked thoughts that articulated connection between the elements. These notations (lines physically drawn between elements) were memoed, adding a further data source to the iterative process of recognising patterns and relationships. Grzanka (2020) stated “SA encourages consistent analytic pivoting between concrete empirical data and more abstract, conceptual ideas, including mapping and memoing” (p. 4). Not to be oversimplified as mere brainstorming, the purposefully descriptive process of situational mapping helped bring to light relevant boundaries for the situation under investigation. In this study, as result of empirical evidence and significant critical reasoning (Clarke et al., 2022) these boundaries extended to include national legislation and frameworks regarding ECEC curriculum and workforce, as well as the influence of dominant narratives and public debate, socio-cultural elements of inclusivity and stereotypes.

4.7.3. *Situational (Ordered) Map*

Following numerous iterations and analysis of the messy maps that were created as part of the initial research thinking and orientation process, the next step was to create situational (ordered) maps. These maps helped to organise the thinking evidenced in the messy maps in a more structured approach. Having the ability to consider meso-system social and structural (organisation or institution) interpretations (Clarke & Friese, 2007; Kalenda, 2016) the ordered nature of these

Utilising Clarke's (2005) suggested categorisation of ordered maps, Figure 4.9 outlines individual human, collective human, non-human actors, silent actors, political and economic elements, socio-cultural and symbolic elements, temporal and spatial elements and major debates/public issues or dominant narratives. Developing this map supported the analytical process of deconstructing the messy map and became a tool by which to organise the structure of elements (Dudley et al., 2022; Perez & Cannella, 2011). The making of the ordered map illuminated relationships and interactions in discourses, and the early emergence of themes in the research situation (Eastwood et al., 2016).

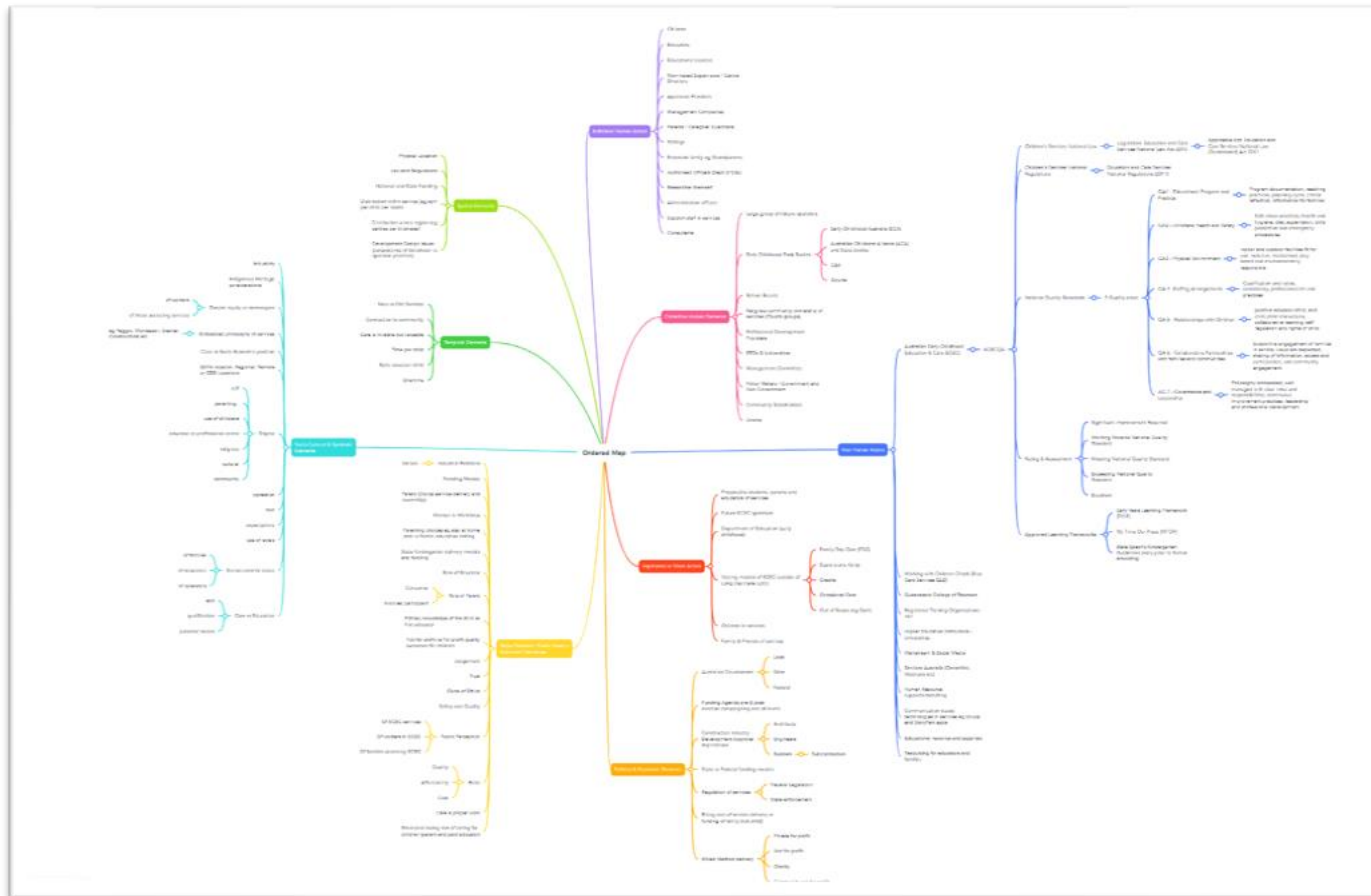


Researcher Memo:

In my study – these relational maps (that connect the elements in meaningful ways) were co-constructed with participants. Following analysis of initial interview, situational (messy) maps were created. At the second interview, these maps were utilised in two ways. Firstly, as a method of member checking to ensure concepts drawn out of initial observation and interview were interpreted correctly with consensus provided by participants. Secondly, a deeply engaging process of participatory relational mapping with researcher and participant was undertaken. The relational lines were made together, whilst articulating the justifications for why. Each line was accompanied by memos.

As the depth and breadth of conversation increased, so did a more valuable level of participation and collaboration between researcher, participant, and the data. Collective meaning making was acquired and cultivated, where multiple truths of the lived experience co-existed to highlight the situation. As an instrument in the data collection and analysis process, the memos, field notes, journalling and interview transcriptions were also included as data (Clarke et al., 2022; Meszaros et al., 2019).

Figure 4.9
Situational (Ordered) Map

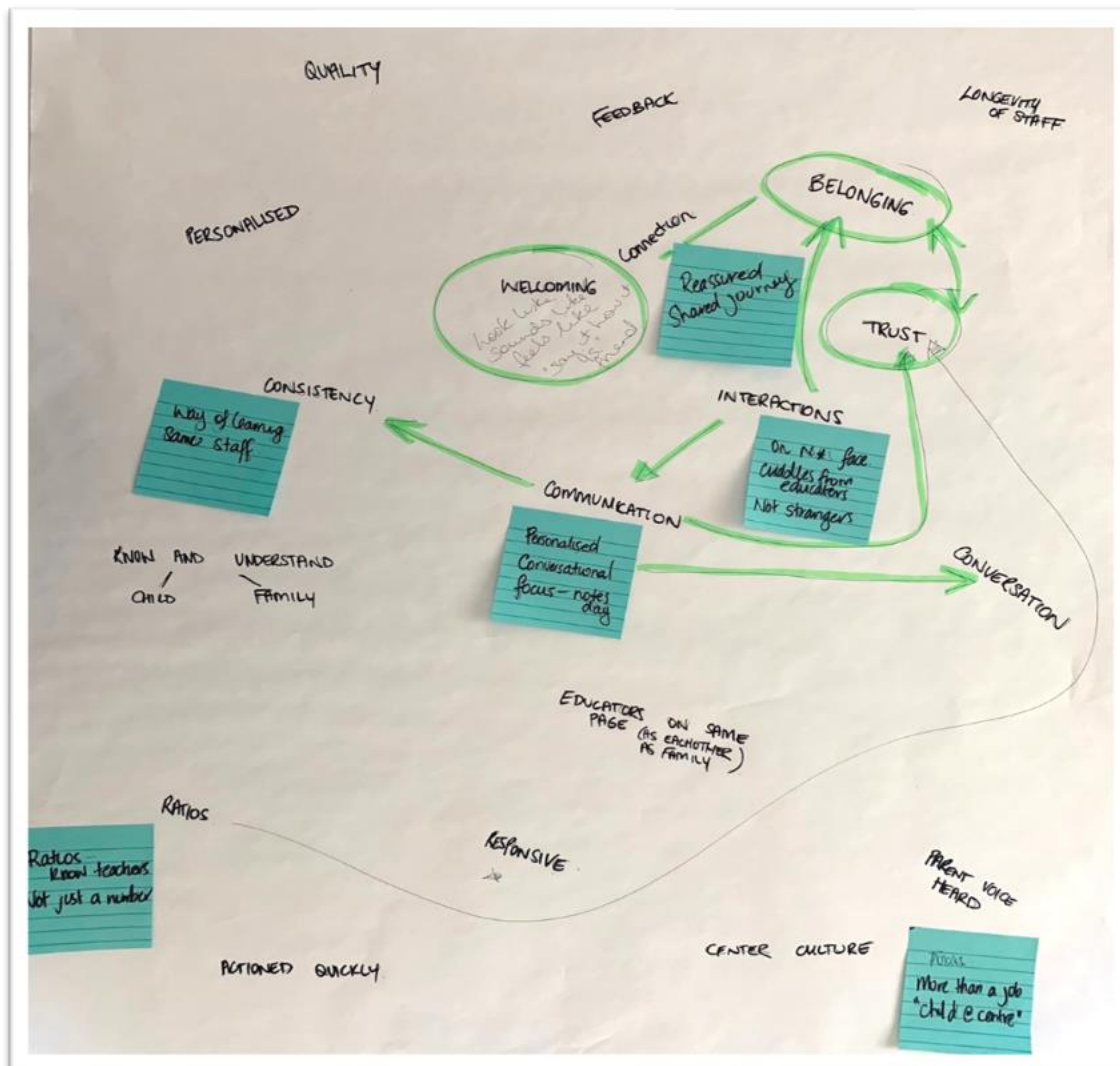


Note: This map was designed online using MindMeister program. It is acknowledged that this image is too small to be legible here, however was included to provide an overall bird's eye view. The following link is provided to offer readers access to the live interactive map for further clarity <https://mm.tt/app/map/3074876457?t=A Yb3q9i58x>

4.7.4. *Situational (Relational) Map*

In this study, the relational mapping was overlaid onto the messy maps. Figure 4.10 is an example of the relational mapping completed in collaboration between one participant and the researcher. It was the intention of these efforts to draw out participants voice in explicating their perspectives on, and experiences of, collaborative partnerships in high quality settings. In this case, the researcher supported the development of higher order thinking through the co-construction of meaning, in relation to the practices observed by the researcher. Having engaged with each other twice prior to collaborating on this map, once at the time of the observation and the other being the first interview, afforded for some familiarity and common ground between researcher and participant prior undertaking the mapping task. What was evidenced in Figure 4.10 were the relationships between elements, represented empirically (Grzanka, 2020). Purposeful lines connected ideas, that were memoed using post it notes and documented in transcripts. The connections, thinking out loud, and decision-making justifications that were derived from this process all contributed to further data for the study. A relational map (See Figure 4.10 as an example) was completed with each of the six participants during their second interviews. Discussions during the mapping processes (forming part of the second interview) were recorded and transcribed, serving as an added member-checking method of trustworthiness.

Figure 4.10
Situational (Relational) Map



Note : The above example of Situational (Relational) Map completed with parent participant Naomi from Mountain Kids provides an example of her connections between elements (lines), and memos of additional thinking and decision making (blue notes).

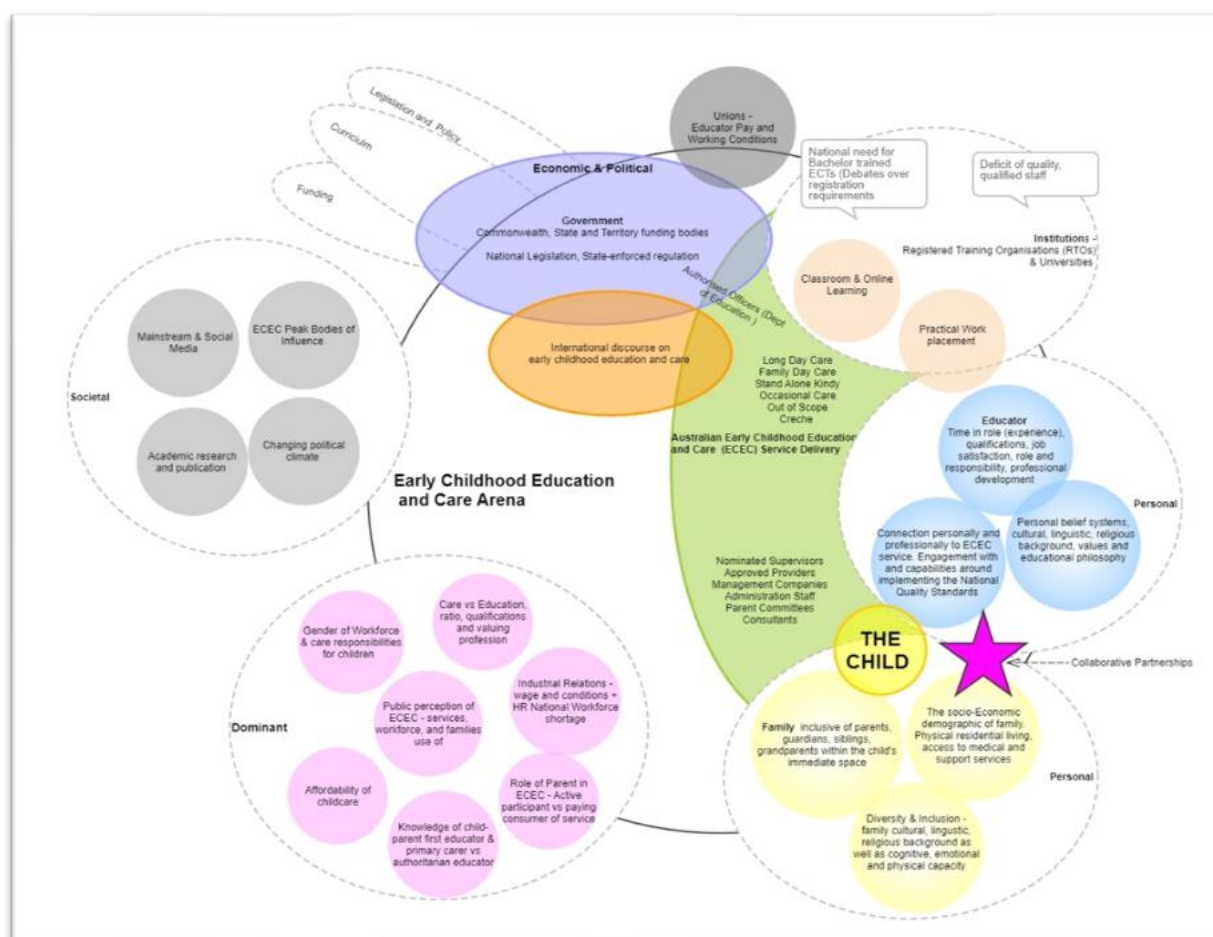
4.7.5. Social Worlds/Arena (SWA) Map

Permeable boundaries, overlapping and conflicting social worlds, organisations, groups, and individuals are evidenced in social worlds/arena maps (Clarke et al., 2022). With dynamic and bidirectional relationships, this mapping brought to light dominant values and subjectivities (Grzanka, 2020), shaped by

collective ecologies, towards the generation of discourse (Kalenda, 2016). In Figure 4.11, the social worlds align with mutual pursuits and activities. For example, the personal *social world* of educators is depicted by the blue circles, and families in yellow. These notably have permeable boundaries indicated by the broken dashed lines surrounding them. Meanwhile, *arenas* are made up of social worlds, these are shown in Figure 4.11 as the green ECEC Service Delivery are representative areas of debate and contestation, drawn with solid line boundaries.

Figure 4.11

Social Worlds/Arena (SWA) Map



Note: This map was designed online using the Gliffy program. It is acknowledged that this image is too small to be legible here, however was included to provide an overall bird's eye view. The following link is provided to offer readers access to the live interactive map for further clarity.

<https://go.gliffy.com/go/share/suv3hdx2udbcqmxqxqro4>

In collating data towards answering the research questions, the SWA map in this investigation afforded for a bird's eye view of the research situation (Batool & Webber, 2019), accentuating how the variety of arenas interconnected and influenced the broader narrative. Social worlds are fluid and overlapping, noted by their permeable boundaries, that Grzanka (2020) describes as porous. To develop the SWA map for this project, the researcher deeply contemplated discourses influencing the phenomenon, and the way in which the social worlds and subsequent arenas were organised. These considerations by the researcher gave light to the impact of power and dynamic interactions within the SWA.

Dudley et al. (2022) wrote that in order to fully understand the influence of power of, and on, arenas the researcher required perspective. Supported by this study's poststructural research paradigm, the role of the researcher as an active participant and valuing of the researcher's embeddedness in ECEC, enabled key insights of the field to be included in the SWA map that would otherwise have been lost by traditional methods. The SWA maps highlighted relationships that included organisations, ideologies and technologies with a common goal (Martin et al., 2016). Kalenda (2016) attest that SA accentuates these linkages more effectively than traditional methods as SWA dominant values are emphasised by their boundaries. As was the case in this study, as the boundaries or membership of these groups fluctuated, so did the subjectivities shaped by the social ecologies (Grzanka, 2020). These maps were in a state of flux, not intended to infer weakness by way of instability, but rather a fluidity that enabled the complexity of real life to be evidenced.



Researcher Memo:

Frustrated with working and reworking my maps and the intensity of overlaying elements, social worlds and arena boundaries, I returned to some of the literature related to the mapping process. I was inspired and found useful the words of Meszaros et al. (2019, p. 2) :

“Researchers must grapple with the complexities inherent within the studied situation and resist characterizing issues as linear outcomes. By attending to complex systems, researchers are now dealing with nonlinear systems—systems where outcomes are not directly proportional to inputs or changes in the causal elements” (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014).

Thinking about the social worlds, their interactions with other worlds, and boundaries, I really started to understand more deeply why Grzanka (2020) wrote about avoiding tacit assumptions. It’s so important here. Mapping, remapping, reviewing, seeing the gaps, looking for the silences.... While the process is data driven, with SAs underpinnings embedded in poststructural traditions the opportunity to celebrate multiple truths is liberating. Endurance is needed in performing SA. It’s manual and intensive. Whilst software and technologies are available, and certainly have power and a place in research analysis, this feels much more about the relationship between the researcher and their data – it’s almost sacred. Levitt et al. (2017) call it high fidelity!

The ponderings within this memo and the benefits of such journalling processes were evidenced in the production of the SWA map in Figure 4.11 that resulted from the researcher’s intensive connection with the data. Further extrapolation of the value of journaling, and the researcher’s relationship with the data is detailed in the

third paper of this thesis, Chapter 6, Evidencing metacognition through metaphor to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research.

4.7.6. Positional Maps

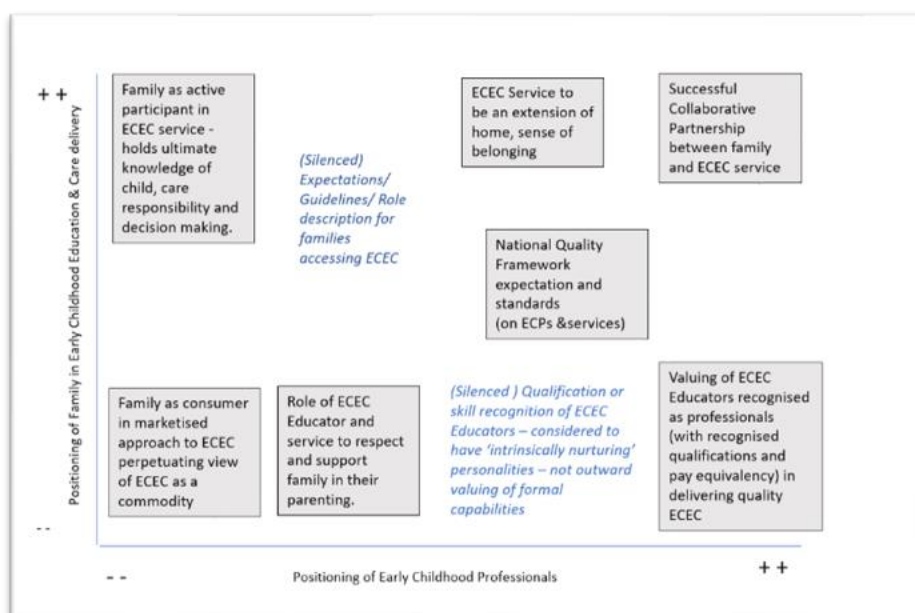
Requiring immersion in the data, positional maps offer a unique method by which to understand power, complexities, contention, and silences (Clarke et al., 2022; Meszaros et al., 2019). As the relationships between each element were explored in this study, the researcher plotted discursive issues arising in the data (Martin et al., 2016). These were autonomous and not typical or characteristic of an individual or group, and sometimes contradictory (Meszaros et al., 2019). Martin et al. (2016) describe positional maps as “higher order conceptualisations of positions in the data” (p. 104). Evidencing the complexities of the situation, this deeply analytical tool supported the researcher in forefronting the nuances between positions, and “mak[ing] silences speak” (Meszaros et al., 2019, p. 6).

Development of the positional map was the most onerous for the researcher. Contrary to Clarke’s (2003) intent that the mapping process would release *neophytes* from ‘analytical paralysis’ (p. 560), the researcher found the positional mapping the most arduous of the three cartographic types in SA. A deeply analytical, layered and time-consuming map to complete, it required “sitting” with the data. Clarke et al. (2018) conceded that not all studies are amenable to the completion of each type of map in Situational Analysis. The maps and the mapping processes are non-linear and enhance the interpretation of data from empirical evidence and critical thinking (Grzanka, 2020). Some authors of SA studies claim the making of positional maps particularly to be problematic, such as den Outer et al. (2013) who found they “clos[e] down the space of possibility” (p. 1516), or Viviani (2016) who preferred a method of ‘creating dialogue’ over positional maps for flexibility of representation. In

this study however, the researcher concurred with Grzanka (2020) who noted these maps develop knowledge not just illuminate content and as such, she chose to sit with the data to develop the positional map successfully.

Identification of the semantic axes is a process of position-taking (Kalenda, 2016). These illuminate areas of contention or central themes across the situation and can be ideological not literal between samples (Grzanka, 2020). There is no numeric association as, mentioned previously, these positions are discursive and not aligned quantitatively to a certain number of participants or data points (See Figure 4.12). It is interesting to note here however that what Clarke (2005) refers to as ‘negative cases’, similar to outliers in quantitative data, can be embraced as Grzanka (2020) have done to highlight or privilege the uncommon/atypical position taken. Meszaros et al. (2019) further acknowledges that multiple, even contradictory positions can be held by both individuals and collectives concurrently. These conceptualisations of negative cases by Grzanka (2020) and Meszaros et al. (2019) were embraced in this study, particularly in the undertaking of positional mapping.

Figure 4.12
Positional Map



The Positional Map Figure 4.12 evidence positions taken, not taken, resisted, and silenced with regard to the positioning of educators and families in ECEC delivery.

4.8. Harnessing Non-linear Data Analysis Methods

Utilising SA methods endorsed the simultaneous interaction of the research components to be concurrent rather than sequential (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2022; Saldana et al., 2011). Given this, a critical process was harnessing a non-linear approach to data collection and analysis using a concurrent mapping process throughout research phases of observation and semi-structured interviewing. Batool and Webber (2019) advocated for the ability of this data collection method to evidence various complexities influencing the phenomenon through multiple sources.

Observation and interview data, including the transcripts of discussions during collaborative relational mapping with participants, were uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 Plus, a qualitative data analysis software program. MAXQDA 2022 Plus and its extension MaxMaps were specifically selected for use with this project as the program offered greater visualisation of data and a variety of mapping tools, comparative to other software offerings such as NVivo. The visualisation of relationships in the data and between coding elements was an important consideration in selecting a software for working with situational analysis. Findings and key insights of this study were drawn from this process of analysis, which will be overviewed here, beginning with observation and interviews.

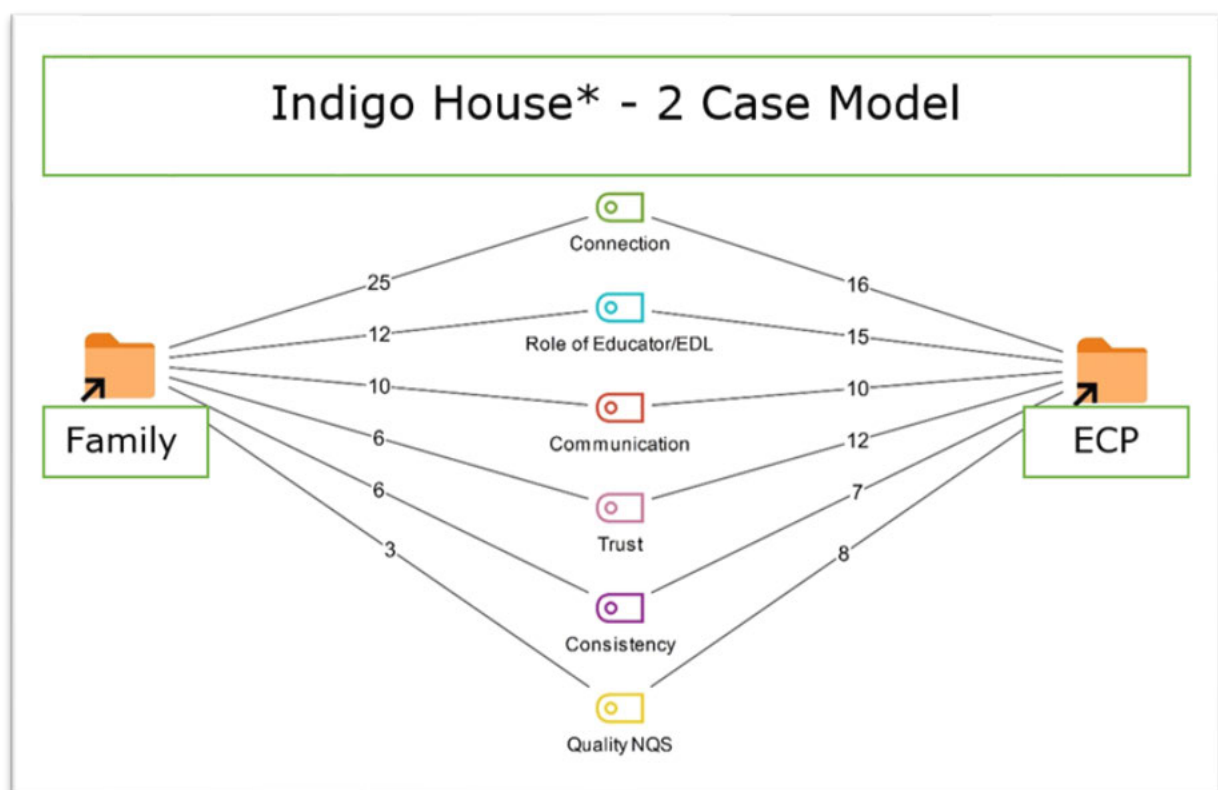
4.8.1. Observation Analysis

Analysis of observational data took on three phases, as guided by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) as data reduction, data display, and interpretation and verification. Utilising the SET tool to undertake the observations was a data reduction

tool as it streamlined the allocation of observed aspects of the research situation, for example, the objects utilised (or not utilised) during an interaction. The second phase of data display was particularly supported by the MAXQDA software, as quotes, codes and themes were teased out of the raw data. A continual process of reviewing, cross checking, seeking patterns and making connections ensued. MAXQDA software enabled a charting of cases, for example, parallels between educator and parent could be illuminated through case model reports (Figure 4.13). Interpretation and verification final phase of observational analysis translated how this information fit together, the meaning and sense making it provided and its impact, particularly towards answering the second research question.

Figure 4.13

MAXQDA Two Case Code Model



On one hand analysis of observations is a tedious but logical organisation of coding, building descriptions and reviewing for themes. On the other hand,

observations elicit tacit learnings that are not necessarily explicit and tangible. Insight and eureka 'ah ha' moments that offer the illumination of connections in the data don't magically appear. These "flashes" as DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) call them, were a result of iterative working and reworking of data (p. 180). The relationship between the researcher and data from a poststructural perspective is inextricably linked. Again, the intentional and interwoven nature of this study's theoretical underpinnings and choice of data collection and analysis methods remain inseparable, serving as a distinguishing mark of its trustworthiness and reliability (see further discussion of this in Section 4.9). Extending upon findings illuminated by observational analysis was data gleaned from semi-structured interview, the analysis of which is detailed below.

4.8.2. Interview Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by Pacific Transcription services. Uploaded into MAXQDA software, these transcripts were open coded line by line. This was followed by a process of axial coding. Similarly to the observations, the process of reviewing, summarising, coding, and connecting the data surfaced significant findings. The MAXQDA analysis enabled the researcher to illuminate nuances, outliers, and key considerations towards answering the first research question. Two examples of such reports are offered below. First, in Figure 4.14 a cross section displays the co-occurrence of themes in a transcript, and Figure 4.15 following displays the cross section of quotes pulled related to said themes from the transcript.

Figure 4.14

MAXQDA Code Co-occurrence Model

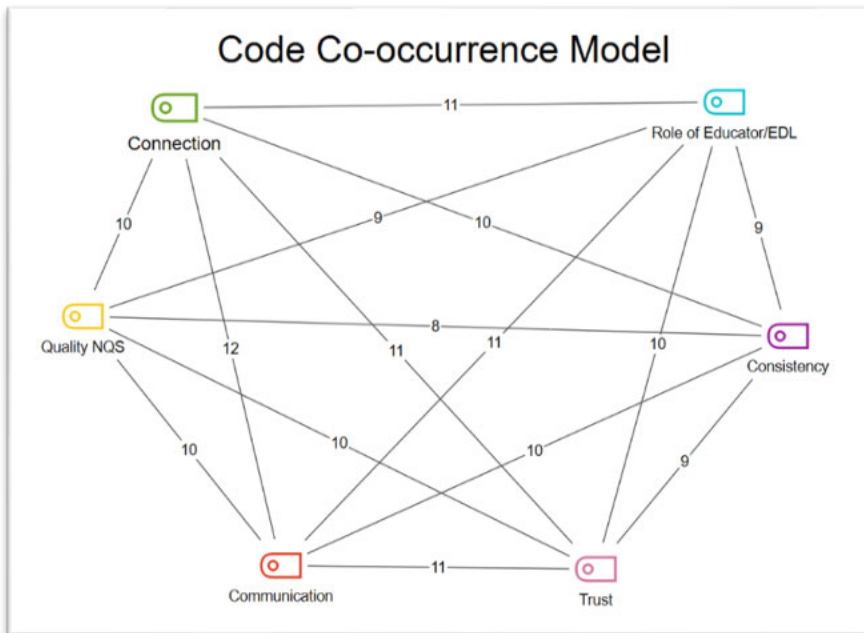

















Figure 4.15

MAXQDA Cross Section of Participant Quotes

MAXQDA 2022

2/03/2023

interactive Quote Matrix

	 _In_2 (N=1)	 _In_2 (N=1)	 _Interview_1 (1) (N=1)	 _Interview_1 (1) (N=1)
Connection	<p>So that even if a child is heightened or a family is anxious when they arrive, when they walk in the space is calm. The relationships with families, that you were very much in tune with the personal worlds of the families.</p>  <p>Transcriptions > 2nd Interview >  : 2: 11 - 11 (0)</p> <p>I think too, that helps with that sense of trust and sense of belonging because we take the time to know our families, like you said, at a deeper level. Rather than just for the handover of their child. Which is what we chatted about earlier.</p>	<p>One of the greatest assets of the centre was that they really, genuinely know and understand your child.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 2nd Interview >  : 7 - 7 (0)</p> <p>Yeah. Yep. The length of time that the staff have been at the centre played an important part of what you thought helped to build that collaborative relationship. Sense of belonging, you said that there's a real culture in the centre of that collaboration and unity...</p> <p>Transcriptions > 2nd Interview >  : 2: 23 - 23 (0)</p> <p>...which then led to that sense of belonging, not just for educators but for families and children.</p>	<p>the initial connection is with the parent, because I think what we share with the parent draws them into our centre. So when we take the families on a tour, it is more about building that connection, and that sense of reassurance with our families, because they're our key stakeholder.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 1st Interview >  : view_1 (1): 6 - 8 (0)</p> <p>So then through our connections with the parents, and at the time, we're sort of talking to - if they bring the child and depending on the age, we do engage with the child as well. Because that initial relationship and sense of security that we connect with the child, the parent also sees. So, it's sort of that holistic connection initially. Then once we successfully</p>	<p>But yeah, just that feel of coming in and the girls were so welcoming, and we sat in there and had a play, and then transitioning from room to room has just always been so welcoming.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 1st Interview >  : view_1 (1): 26 - 26 (0)</p> <p>I think just like the sense of belonging</p> <p>Transcriptions > 1st Interview >  : view_1 (1): 28 - 28 (0)</p> <p>You come in and you're kind of like a family here. It's not like you're just dropping your kid off kind of thing. They always welcome Nate and give him that attention as well. So yeah, I think that's just really special</p>
Consistency	<p>That trust and a sense of belonging were two really important elements. That the hands on leadership that you have, gave that consistency between the practices that a parent was welcomed with at the front desk, right through all of the classrooms. The communication then. The conversation was consistent as well. If something had happened in the classrooms, you also knew about it. Even if you hadn't been present, you were aware of it. So then, if a parent spoke to you or you could - if they saw you first, you could lead into the conversation, and then it was also something that had been said in classroom.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 2nd Interview >  : 2: 5 - 5 (0)</p>	<p>That there was - that if something had happened in one room, that they also - Bec and Meryl also knew about it out the front and you could kind of communicate both with your child and with you, for all of that. That there was always constant messaging and continual conversations but a lot of it was as - didn't necessarily have to be technology based to get your information. You were having a lot more personalised conversations about things.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 2nd Interview >  : 2: 5 - 5 (0)</p> <p>There's like consistent kind of learning. I guess and also I guess the</p>		<p>Yeah, and it's always consistent.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 1st Interview >  : view_1 (1): 47 - 47 (0)</p> <p>but I think the staff have been here a long time. So I think that that says something about the culture of the Centre as well. I'm not saying that people move on because things are bad, but I think a lot of the staff have been here a long time, so I think that kind of provides that culture as well.</p> <p>Transcriptions > 1st Interview >  : view_1 (1): 148 - 148 (0)</p>

Data from semi structured interviews, and transcriptions of discussions during collaborative relational mapping provided for the detailing of educator and family descriptions of collaborative partnerships. This data further informed the creation of numerous situational analysis maps, the process of which is extrapolated further now.

4.8.3. Situational Analysis Mapping

Parallel to the analysis of observations and interviews, the three types of SA cartographic maps were developed in an iterative process that spanned many months. An extension of MAXQDA that supports visualisation, called MAXMaps, was utilised for SA mapping, as well as web-based programs including Gliffy.com and MindMeister.com. The process of collecting the data, creating, and analysing the maps are further detailed in the publication *“Utilising Situational Analysis to Understand Educator-Family Collaborative Partnerships”* that forms Chapter 5 of this thesis.

As previously established the role and positioning of the researcher within the context were supported by the study’s theoretical framework and method. Information and perceptions were mediated through the researcher as a co-constructor of meaning and knowledge (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While much of the descriptive nature of fieldwork is inductive, the analytical pivoting provided for through SA encourages an abductive tussling of the data (Clarke et al., 2018). It moves from concrete and cognitive to abstract and analytical, providing for an experiential opportunity. Friese (2022) used the term “toggle” to reflect the simultaneous nature of doing SA as the researcher flicks back and forth, in and out of the literature, the research situation, the data and analysis in a non-linear fashion.

As a result of the analysis process the findings, and subsequent key insights, are further discussed in Chapter 7: Discussion.

4.9. The Role of the Researcher, Reflexivity, and Trustworthiness

In this study, researcher reflexivity, rigor and trustworthiness were addressed in numerous ways. Firstly, the researcher undertook a process of journaling throughout the entirety of the research project, from formulation of the research questions through all stages of data collection and analysis. These journal entries are noted and referred to at the start of this research study for their value in offering transparent insight to the researcher's thoughts and decision-making processes. Pertinent examples of these journal entries have been scattered throughout this thesis as researcher memos that interject the chapters with significant, noteworthy and at times contentious provocations.

Journalling provided for critical reflection, through a process of reflexive examination of the researchers own assumptions and a conscious acknowledgement of a willingness to pursue alternative perspectives. Critical self-reflection of those embedded in positions of power within their research context is essential (Rudman, 2013). In order to support and lead this process in this study, the researcher chose to utilise the Johari Window model to scrutinise her self-awareness thoroughly in an ongoing process.

Charmaz (2017) discusses a methodological self-consciousness for researchers, a reflexive scrutiny of themselves, their data, and analyses. Akin to Clarke (2005) concept of positionality, it explicates with transparency the standpoint of the researcher. The researcher found that the process of journalling grounded her instincts and widened the lens through which she worked. Completing journals prior to conducting data collection within services, when sitting "with" the data, and at

times when she felt the analytical paralysis, the researcher would work and rework the iterative maps. SA advocates for the subjective interpretive skills of the researcher as valuable contributions to the research (Grzanka, 2020). Journalling, and the metacognitive processes involved encouraged the researcher's own review of her methodological assumptions, a mindfulness of worldviews, cultural sensitivities, power, privilege, and subjectivities (Drummond, 2020; West et al., 2022) at every turn. The explanatory capabilities of the participatory researcher throughout this project were an articulation of the strength of SA's ontological and epistemological foundations (Eastwood et al., 2016; Sayer, 2000).

Positioning of the researcher within the research situation was supported by the theoretical orientations and research design of this study (Clarke, 2005; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). A poststructural case study and the use of SA embraced the complex positionality of the researcher as both a research instrument and an active participant (Clarke et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2018; den Outer et al., 2013; Kahn, 2014). While demanding reflexivity as a caveat in the process, SA repositions the researcher from *all knowing* to *acknowledged participant* in the production of knowledge (Clarke, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Holstein & Gubrium, 2002). Given the collaborative aspects of this study design, it was particularly important to have a strong alignment between the research paradigm, researcher's belief systems, and methodological decisions to explicate with transparency the researcher's role. This was achieved through a process of researcher reflexive practices and a technique entitled *Meta- Journal, Metaphor, Memo* (Meta-JMM) discussed in detail in the publication *Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research* that forms Chapter 6 of this thesis.

Researchers utilising SA such as Gluck (2018) and Grzanka (2020) discuss the pressure and burden SA places on the researcher as their prominence within the research explicates complexities, power relations and draws out invisible elements. A criticism of SA and other critical qualitative inquiry methods is the complicated replicability of SA (Clarke, 2005; Grzanka, 2020; Levitt et al., 2017). In recognition of the embedded nature of the researcher themselves in the production of knowledge, Clarke (2005) herself defended SA as she “reframed rigor as the extent to which the researcher is accountable to their data, rather than the extent to which a finding is able to be reproduced” (Grzanka, 2020, p. 12). As was the case in this research project, the intense relationship between researcher and their data through the process of SA enhanced trustworthiness and reliability.

Employing the use of memos and field notes for analytic interrogation (Charmaz, 2006) enabled the unambiguous notation of decision making, thoughts, ideas, and relationships by the researcher regarding any or all aspects of the research were instrumental to this method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Produced throughout the mapping phases, in this study particularly during collaborative relational mapping with participants, the memos and notes were included as data themselves (Meszaros et al., 2019). Ligita et al. (2022) promotes the capabilities of the researcher as having the ability to elevate mapping and analysis from being simply descriptive to providing deep abstraction. This was certainly the case in supporting the higher order thinking skills of participants as they co-constructed the relational maps, making connections between elements and drawing out deeper understandings of the phenomena.

As an early childhood educator, academic and researcher within the situation, the contribution of the researcher’s knowledge of the situation was embraced by SA

foundations. Other users of SA, such as Eastwood et al. (2016), insightfully noted measures of bracketing their own situatedness within the research, together with continual reflexive practices, allowed for more profound “understanding of phenomena to emerge from the voices of the informants” (Eastwood et al., 2016, p. 11). Bracketing situatedness and reflexive practices was a valuable consideration in this study, particularly during observations taken by the researcher using the Situated Evidence Tool (SET) (see *Observation section 4.6.1*).

Concurring wholeheartedly with Eastwood et al. (2016) the researcher found that her role as an active participant and instrument in the undertaking of situational analysis highlighted with transparency and positivity, the integral role of the researcher. Bracketing her existing engagement in the ECEC sector added value to the mapping process by providing an underlying knowledge base that did not detract, nor overbear the contribution of stakeholders. Gluck (2018) further asserts the engrained relationship between the researcher and their data is evidenced through the mapping process, without which the search for the silenced or invisible data would be futile.

Communicating abstract and complex analytical thinking is difficult in any research. SA offered an insightful visual tool through the variety of mapping phases to demonstrate trustworthiness of the data and analysis (Ligita et al., 2022). The active engagement and participation of stakeholders in “doing” the maps acted as a source of member checking. Furthermore, recording and transcription of discussions during these mapping experiences enabled the participant voice to emerge with and from the data as they generated meaning. New ways of working and the scrutiny of taken for granted viewpoints were made visible through this critical methodology (Dudley et al., 2022; Pérez & Cannella, 2013).

Forefronting of the researcher's role was an important ethical consideration in the design and conduct of this study. Entrenched throughout the project were reflexive processes. To mitigate concerns of collusion or coercion in recruiting participants, service managers approached educators and families regarding voluntary participation in the study at each participant ECEC service, rather the researcher herself. The role of the researcher, her capacity for reflexive practices, critical thinking and journalling have been considered as positively contributing to the trustworthiness of this study. Connectedness of the researcher to their data, choice of methods and the overarching paradigm should evidence integrity (Armstrong et al., 2011; Levitt et al., 2017). Bound by a strong and intertwined allegiance to the research paradigm and philosophical orientations, the collaborative mapping with participants of this study further enhanced its trustworthiness and made a significant methodological contribution to the research field.

4.10. Summary

It was a goal of this research to observe and explore educator and families' experiences of collaborative partnerships in practice. Promoting the opportunity to learn from successful services rated Exceeding the NQS, this study's strengths-based approach was intentionally designed to fill the gap of observational studies and champion the voice of stakeholders. Relational mapping collaboratively with participants drew heavily on the voices of both parents and educators, bringing to light their descriptions of their lived experience of collaborative partnerships.

Stakeholder attitudes, beliefs and values were displayed with transparency in messy, ordered, and relational maps. Social world/arena maps provided for a deconstruction of contextual influences that created barriers and/or enabled collaborative partnerships relationships for actors. Furthermore, social worlds/arena

maps brought to light an appreciation for each actor's context and positioning as it influenced the founding of such relationships between actors. The researcher's interpretation of positional maps identified the stance taken and not taken on various aspects of collaborative partnerships by individuals and organisations, as well as illuminating silent data. Utilising situational maps enabled the representation of heterogeneous complexities in the data.

This chapter began with an explanation of the research paradigm and alignment with the researchers epistemological, ontological, and axiological positionings. Case study and the use of SA were research design decisions justified as the best fit for answering the research questions and filling the evidenced void in existing research. The chapter then detailed the methodological processes undertaken for participant selection, data collection and analysis. Chapter Five and Chapter Six are publications that extend on and further evidence this Methodology chapter.



Researcher Memo:

A caveat of SA is researcher reflexivity. As an insider researcher, like every human, I have preconceived ideas, a set of beliefs, a foundation of my own knowledge and experiences that I carry with me. In life, for the most part, this is a useful toolbox. However, as a researcher I need to be wary, conscious, and accepting of these. I undertake researcher journalling to keep my mind and my intentions clear. Throughout every stage of this journey, I journal. Prior to my confirmation of candidature, in conceptualising this study I began using the Johari Window (a suggestion made by my Associate Supervisor Susan in my first semester as a Doctoral Student) and I have continued this ever since. I use it when reading and formulating my thoughts. I centre myself before visiting research sites to conduct observations or interviews, and following these, to debrief also.

Johari Window Model



Note: From “Johari Window Model,” by R. Smith, E. Carraher and P. DeLisle, 2017, *Leading Collaborative Architectural Practice*, p222 (DOI 10.1002/9781119169277.ch16). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

CHAPTER 5: PAPER 2 – “Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study”.

5.1. Introduction

Engaging in SA throughout this study offered an opportunity to illuminate a deeply intertwined and embedded philosophical orientation and poststructural paradigm that continued to influence and interject through research design processes. Accepted for publication in November 2023 following a presentation at the Ireland International Conference on Education (24-26 October 2023), the unique methodological approach of this case study was explicated in this article *Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study*. Published in Volume 12 of the International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education by Infonomics Society, the journal has an impact factor of 7.8. The paper is presented here in its published state, the citation for which is:

Mason, K. (2023). Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study. *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education*, 12(2), 1855-1860. <https://doi.org/10.20533/ijtie.2047.0533.2023.0231> DOI: 10.20533/ijtie.2047.0533.2023.0231

5.2. Published Paper

Utilising Situational Analysis to Understand Educator-Family Collaborative Partnerships in a Poststructural Case Study

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Abstract

This paper evidences the process of employing Situational Analysis in a poststructural case study that investigated educator-family collaborative partnerships. The author addresses research design decisions that both supported and enhanced the methodology towards the construction of new knowledge. Embedded in the case study across three case sites, three educators and three families participated in a series of observations, interviews, and collaborative mapping to reveal the findings of this project. In filling gaps identified in literature, the study aimed to elucidate the multiple perspectives of stakeholders through observation and interviews, whilst promoting the voice of both families and educators through participatory situational analysis mapping with the researcher. Findings of this study offer opportunities for all stakeholders to deepen their understanding of what enables effective collaborative partnerships in practice. Furthermore, the unique methodological approach to this study adds to the breadth of knowledge in poststructural research possibilities.

1. Introduction

International policies on education reform have nominated family engagement in educational frameworks and curriculums as a priority. Primarily this includes the recognition of families as children's first educators, holders of expert knowledge of the child, and as the child's advocate [1]. A significant body of literature champions the value and importance of collaborative partnership [2] with the *quality* of interactions between families and educators surfaced as being more impactful than the *quantity* alone [3]. The success of educator-family engagements have implications on service provision quality [4] and positive outcomes for the child. Existing research evidences tensions for both educators and families around a lack of conceptual clarity, resulting in poor understandings and practices of collaborative partnership [5].

Research findings on collaborative partnerships globally call for more specific considerations of the mechanisms used to create and maintain successful collaborative partnerships [4]. A number of authors including Vuorinen [2] called for observational studies to consider partnership practices in action,

with particular emphasis on the limited moments of time for educators and families to collaborate at drop off and pick up times [6]. Elevating the voice of each stakeholder's lived experience for themselves was also an important call out by the research field [2, 7, 8].

In the Australian setting, scholars [9, 10] contend that inexact interpretation of ambiguous language in the National Quality Framework (NQF) has the potential to engender inadequate engagement practices between educators and families. Challenging these findings, data from the Australian Childrens Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) assessment results found in Quarter 1 (January to March 2021) that 29% of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services rated *Exceeding* the NQS in Quality Area 6 (QA6) Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities [11].

The identified gaps in existing research, together with the ACECQA data, offered an opportunity to consider more deeply the nature of Australia's ECEC collaborative partnerships through a research project. Ethics approval was provided by University of Southern Queensland (H21REA115) as this study sought to investigate the following three research questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. The research questions and associated data collection method

Study Question	Data collection Method
How do educators and families describe their experiences of collaborative partnerships?	Semi Structured interviews
How do educators and families interact in ways that evidence collaborative partnerships?	Observation
What are the key components and inclusions that reflect exceeding collaborative partnerships?	Observation Semi Structured interviews Participant & researcher

	collaborative relational mapping
--	----------------------------------

2. Research Design

Permeating each element of this study's research design [12] were the poststructural tenants that celebrated multiple truths from a diversity of perspectives, providing for no one viewpoint to be privileged over another [13, 14]. The complexities of the interrelationship between people and their environment were illuminated through qualitative investigations where the phenomenon was interpreted by the meanings people brought to them [15]. Rosenberg and Yates [16] offer case study as an opportunity that is "not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position" (p447), that provides agnostic and practical versatility. Case study offers a pragmatic view of knowledge that elevates the complexities of life [17]. The reflexive nature of this study's qualitative design allowed for the simultaneous interaction of the research components to be concurrent rather than sequential, [12] further supported by the use of Situational Analysis (SA) [18] methods. This allowed for a critically multilayered consideration of the research situation, participants, environment, and the co-construction of knowledge itself.

2.1. Situational Analysis (SA)

The critical gaze provided for through SA considers how phenomenon are taken up, resisted, or modified by gaining insight from the conditions, structures, processes, mechanisms and relationships (and the links between these) in an iterative cartographic approach [19]. In this study, the cartographic mapping of qualitative data that was co-constructed through interaction [20, 21], enabled the researcher to tease out a comprehensive framework that exposed connections and relationships across the research situation. The positioning of the researcher within the context as an active participant and research instrument was supported by the poststructural framework and embraced by SA [13, 22]. Three types of maps were produced. These are: 1) Situational and relational maps, 2) Social world/arena maps, and 3) Positional maps. These maps, and the findings they elucidate will be extrapolated further shortly.

2.2. Data Collection

This research sought to take a strengths-based approach to answering the research questions. All licensed ECEC services in Queensland, Australia that

were rated 'Exceeding' in Quality Area 1: Program and Practice, and Quality Area 6: Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities (308 in total) were emailed in August 2022 and offered an opportunity to participate in the study. Of these 308 services, a non-probability sample of three ECEC services were engaged for the study.

Table 2. Case site details

Service Name	Places
Gumnut Childcare*	50
Indigo House*	175
Mountain Kids*	99

Purposive intensity sampling was utilised to select educators ($N=3$) followed by convenience sampling for families ($N=3$) in the space. As this study's intent was to deeply understand a small number of participants, there was no prevailing rule regarding sample size [23].

Data collection was carried out from September to December 2022 and included participant observation followed by semi structured interviews with the educators ($n=3$) and families ($n=3$). Within a poststructural case study the variety of data collection methods creates multiple dynamic viewpoints from which to consider numerous relationships and positions within the data.

2.3. Data Analysis

Observation and interviews were uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 Plus. Transcripts were open coded line by line. This was followed by a process of axial coding. Simultaneously to this, the three types of situational analysis cartographic maps began to develop. SA is celebrated for its ability to embrace the messy complexities of research situations, particularly harnessing with transparency the role and positioning of the researcher [24, 25].

2.3.1. Messy (Abstract) Map. Messy Maps were the first to be created in this study. These evolved from situational data of the research situation as defined by Clarke [18] as encompassing all that is in and around the research phenomenon, as well as being informed by initial data collection observations and interviews with participants. As an iterative process, SA mapping provides for multiple versions of maps to be worked and reworked. This messy map in Figure 1 is the saturated result of these productions. The culmination of researching literature, experiencing the field, deconstructing statistics, and deep consideration of all factors, human, nonhuman, discourses, structures, actors, and elements that influence the research situation. The underpinning theoretical framework of the study's design embraces the researcher's

existing literature, or might illuminate areas of opportunity for further investigation.

2.3.4. Social World/Arena (SWA) Map. Concurrently to the situational maps (messy, ordered, and relational), the Social World/Arena (SWA) map began to develop from information provided through observation and interviews, literature, and research data. Inspired by symbolic interactionism [27] and akin to a meso-level consideration in an ecological systems approach, the SWA map categorises actors social worlds in the research situation [24]. These maps illustrate relations between social worlds, sites of action, and influences on the phenomenon under investigation. Distinctly postmodern, the permeable boundaries of the social worlds allow for fluid and bi-directional influence of the multiple social worlds encompassed in the arena. Importantly, social worlds are all of the same significance and therefore no one social world is provided more prominence over another [18], also in keeping with the postmodern roots of SA [22, 24]. The SWA map (Figure 4) helped make sense of contemporary circumstances, relationships and connections between social worlds, and the function of dominant or marginalised systems.

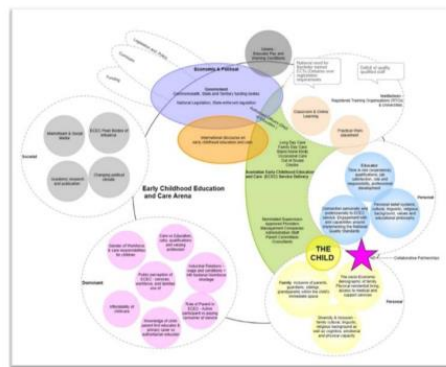


Figure 4. Social World Arena/Map of ECEC context

2.3.4. Positional Map. The final cartographic map is the Positional map. This proved the most difficult, time consuming and deeply analytical piece of the situational analysis method (See Figure 5). It also yielded some of the most significantly meaningful outcomes. Positional maps not only highlight dominant positions, but importantly they highlight the silent data. They provide a visual representation of conflicts in the research situation [25]. Positional maps do not denote positions taken by individuals or social groups, rather the collective research situation. This deliberately reduces the versimplification of positioning issues and controversies in the research situation in a non-binary manner [24, 26]. It

exemplifies what Clarke calls sites of silence, that are present but remain unarticulated.

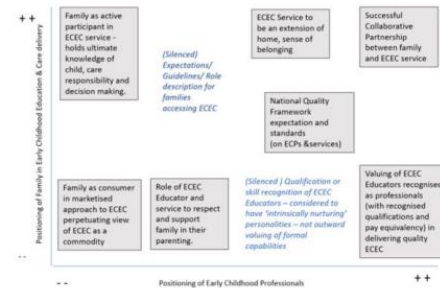


Figure 5. Positional map

3. Conclusion

This paper discusses the *process* of completing situational analysis in a poststructural case study research project. The findings and outcomes from this study are three-fold. Contributions to new knowledge will be offered methodologically, theoretically and in practice. The results have numerous implications for the Early Childhood field and are of too broader scope for specific inclusion here.

Situational Analysis served as a deeply cognitive analytical tool that challenged the researcher. The undertaking of each mapping task, and the deep connection between the researcher and their data was undeniable in this study. It provided a methodological integrity and high fidelity through participants active co-construction of meaning and knowledge, further braiding together the theoretical foundations of the study and the philosophical orientations of the researcher.

The research design enabled a drawing of conclusions from the data towards answering the research questions. Silences in the data have afforded for the illumination of further research opportunities. As a result, this study accomplished enhancements to the field in three ways:

- Firstly, the research design answered the call from existing literature for observational studies, and the escalation of parent voice in collaborative partnership research.
- Secondly, this study provided a methodological contribution to the application of situational analysis through collaborative relational mapping processes with participants. The use of SA cartographic mapping provided for a deeper understanding of the components and practices that fostered successful collaborative partnerships.

- Finally, this study's findings have culminated to create a future opportunity to develop a collaborative partnership model that can be extrapolated across international education curriculum frameworks and settings, offering a tangible guide for all stakeholders who participate in these services.

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5.3. Links and Implications

Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study offers insight for scholars wishing to engage in SA, into the process and technique by which this useful data collection and analysis tool was utilised. Furthermore, in a contribution to new knowledge, the collaborative relational mapping with participants of the study were explicated to evidence the powerful capacity of this approach in harnessing stakeholder viewpoints and collaborative meaning making. Adding to the existing literature on ethics and trustworthiness in qualitative studies, this paper builds on integrity and reliability as it evidences the deep interrelationships between the researcher and their data.

CHAPTER 6: PAPER 3 – “Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research”

6.1. Introduction

Prepared for publication and submitted for review by Qualitative Research Journal, this article *Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research* tenders a novel approach to considerations of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Offering the technique Meta-Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM) the paper presents the process Author One undertook to consider the positioning of self throughout the current research project, through three metacognitive phases of orientation, deliberation, and fortification. Integrity and trustworthiness are evidenced through a transparent process of researcher engagement in critical reflexive practices, a tangible alignment of the research paradigm to research decision making, and explication of the steps taken in attaining the higher order metacognitive processes off Meta-JMM.

6.2. Published Paper (Under Review)



Evidencing Metacognition to Enhance Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Journal:	<i>Qualitative Research</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Note
Keywords:	Trustworthiness, Metacognition, Poststructural, Critical self-reflection, Journalling, Metaphor, Memoing
Abstract:	A recognized quandary for many researchers is the positioning of the 'self' in a study, and its impact on trustworthiness. One way to acknowledge the self as qualitative researchers is through critical reflection using metacognitive self-awareness practices. A novel technique for critical reflection that captures a researcher's own metacognitive process of orientation, deliberation, and fortification of their thinking using journalling, metaphor, and memoing is presented in this paper. Meta- Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM), is demonstrated here as it was applied in a poststructural case study utilizing Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005). In sharing this deeply intuitive metacognitive process, this paper presents and invites consideration around the enhancement to trustworthiness that is interwoven with the theoretical alignment of a cohesive research design.

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Evidencing Metacognition to Enhance Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Abstract

A recognized quandary for many researchers is the positioning of the ‘self’ in a study, and its impact on trustworthiness. One way to acknowledge the self as qualitative researchers is through critical reflection using metacognitive self-awareness practices. A novel technique for critical reflection that captures a researcher’s own metacognitive process of orientation, deliberation, and fortification of their thinking using journalling, metaphor and memoing is presented in this paper. Meta- Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM), is demonstrated here as it was applied in a poststructural case study utilizing Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005). In sharing this deeply intuitive metacognitive process, this paper presents and invites consideration around the enhancement to trustworthiness that is interwoven with the theoretical alignment of a cohesive research design.

Keywords

Trustworthiness, metacognition, poststructural, journalling, metaphor, memoing, critical self-reflection

Introduction

It is the essential quest of researchers to establish the importance, depth, and robustness of their studies. Also essential, particularly in a qualitative study, is establishing trustworthiness by providing clarity through explicitly stating the positioning of the researcher, ensuring the rigour of their methodology and methods, and the transparency with which findings are communicated (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This unambiguous expression of trustworthiness by qualitative researchers, that infuses paradigmatic alignment (Rose and Johnson, 2020) demonstrates credibility (Creswell, 2018).

Presenting these insights within this *Researcher Note* offers a contribution to the field of qualitative research, by showcasing and demonstrating a deeply metacognitive process, through the Meta-JMM technique. Examples provided and embedded in this paper draw from Author A’s Doctoral study (Ethics Approval H21REA115, University of Southern Queensland) where extensive reflexive practices were employed. Harnessed in this process were the behind-the-scenes researcher practices of working with literature, processing data, refining research questions and enhancing analysis. The authors of this paper detail an

effective method by which to bring the thinking and sensemaking actions of the researcher to the fore, this paper portrays how doing so enhance the study's trustworthiness.

The *Meta-JMM technique* emerged intuitively as a way of sense making from the contemplations and confusions of an early career researcher grappling with research design, theoretical alignment, and methodological decisions. Meta-JMM describes three phases of metacognitive processing: i) orientation (through journaling); ii) deliberation (application of a metaphor); and iii) fortification (culminating in memos). These explicitly focused reflective practices were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of Author A's doctoral project and will be demonstrated in this paper. The phases are deconstructed below in Figure 1, before a demonstration of Meta-JMM is exemplified in practice.

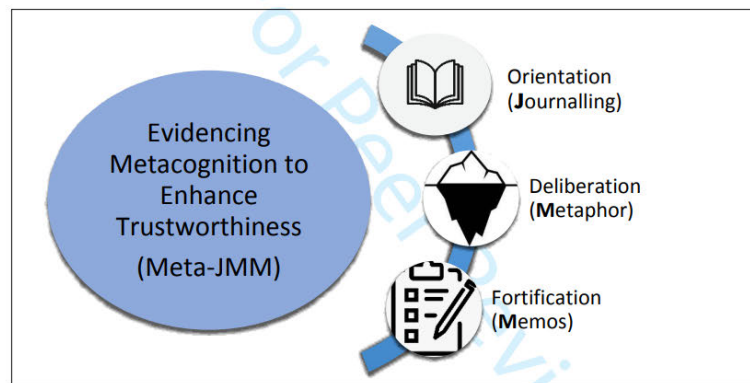


Figure 1. A diagram depicting the three phases of the Meta-JMM technique.

Orientation

Orienting the researcher's thinking about their own thinking is developed in the first phase of the Meta-JMM technique through journaling. A study's rigor and trustworthiness substantiates its integrity (Armstrong et al., 2011). Scholars suggest journaling as a means to enhance the trustworthiness of a study (Baxter et al 1997; Morrison 2012). The process of journaling can be approached in a number of ways, however in many cases journaling serves as a beginning point (i.e., here in the Orientation phase) as a researcher orients themselves with the research situation, literature, and data.

Researcher Journaling is a purposeful collection of the researcher's ponderings, contemplations, and confusions. At times this is simply notes, doodles and drawings, questions to self and ideas for the future. Other times however, such as in the Meta-JMM technique, the journaling requires a depth of writing, reflection, and reflexivity. Its essence is

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3 to firstly acknowledge the positioning of self for researchers, ensuring clarity and perspective
4 for the research as they encounter an move through their research. Journalling in this manner
5 forefronts a selected worldview, to be acknowledged by self and others, in a self-awareness
6 and self-analysis practice throughout the research process (Skukauskaite et al., 2022; Berger,
7 2015; Pillow, 2003).

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11 Of value in enhancing the trustworthiness of studies, literature revealed that diaries
12 (akin to journalling) offered participants empowered insight and a voice in detailing their
13 own lived experiences (Harvey, 2011). The Meta-JMM technique draws on the positionality
14 and reflexivity work of Berger (2015), Phillips et al. (2021) and Skukauskaite et al. (2022)
15 and advocacy for journalling by Filep et al. (2018) and Harvey (2011). Objectivity and
16 credibility were evidenced through metacognitive actions in reflexive journalling by LaBanca
17 (2011). Meta-JMM technique enhanced trustworthiness through journalling and the use of
18 metaphors, with synthesized metacognition articulated as Researcher Memos.

19
20 The Researcher Journal in the Meta-JMM technique is utilized throughout the
21 formulation of the research questions, the justification for the research paradigm and
22 philosophical orientations, choice of methodology and methods and throughout the data
23 collection and analysis phase. Providing for epistemic awareness, journalling “serves as a
24 place to collect, analyse, and revisit data with different lenses, and challenge our own
25 assumptions throughout the course of the research” (Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio, 2009: 305).
26 Orienting ones thoughts, and documenting meaningful metacognitive practices by researchers
27 insights trustworthy interpretations (LaBanca, 2011), and journalling offers an opportunity to
28 evidence this. Applying the Meta-JMM technique offers enhanced illumination of the higher
29 order metacognitive practices of the researcher.

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 **Deliberation**

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47 The deliberation phase applies a deep-thinking manipulation of metacognitive
48 practices evidenced by *applying a metaphor* to researcher journalling. As researchers work
49 and rework their inquiry project, they cultivate research questions, manipulate their data, and
50 in doing so refine and clarify their thinking. Journalling continues throughout this process,
51 where deliberation leads to sensemaking of the complexities of the research situation as the
52 metaphor evolves. Application of a metaphor intensifies the metacognitive processes of the
53 researcher as it assists them to “grow intellectually, and understand the fallacies and
54 limitations in their thinking” by extending reflexivity (Ganapati and Mostafavi, 2021: 1136).

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3 In the Meta-JMM technique, each researcher's metaphor will be derived from their
4 musings over journal entries and tussles with literature and data. A profoundly cognitive
5 processes of intrinsic debates, persuasions, rationalisation and grappling with theoretical
6 constructs ensues for the researcher themselves. This thinking about their thinking in a sense
7 making effort, is at its primary core, for the researcher themselves. Utilising metaphors to
8 gain new insights in complex situations is a valuable research tool (Jensen, 2006). The
9 interconnection of research paradigm, philosophical orientation, methodologies, research
10 questions and the research process, reflect increased trustworthiness (Rose and Johnson,
11 2020). Interjection of these research design elements (Maxwell, 2022) throughout the
12 metaphor development evidences the metacognitive process of the researcher in a visual and
13 creative detailing of a different way of thinking (Bower et al., 2022). Evidencing this tangibly
14 to enhance the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is provided for in the fortification stage
15 through a detailed researcher memo.
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25 26 **Fortification**

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28 Fortification is the culminating phase of the Meta-JMM technique, where the creation
29 of a *Researcher Memo* explicitly articulates the outcomes of practices undertaken in the
30 orientation and deliberation phases. A Researcher Memo is interposed throughout the data
31 collection, analysis, findings and discussion sections of thesis or article. They are of value as
32 they serve as a testimony to the insightful manipulation of overarching research design
33 decisions and the data collected. This is evidenced as the researcher memo effectively
34 captures the *positioning of self* towards enhanced trustworthiness by drawing together the
35 reflexive journalling and metaphor development. Metacognitive processes undertaken by the
36 researcher are reconciled, articulated, and evidenced through the Researcher Memo.
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45 **Demonstrating Meta-JMM in action**

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47 The Meta-JMM technique evolved intuitively from the metacognitive actions of an
48 early career researcher. Attention was directed to the uniqueness of this approach by the
49 researcher's doctoral supervisors, as a key strategy that would contribute to trustworthiness
50 through a cohesive research design and theoretical alignment. Offered now is a demonstration
51 of how Meta-JMM achieves this in practice.
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Meta-JMM Phase 1: Researcher Journalling

Journalling throughout the Meta-JMM technique is primarily a personal craft, where researchers can reflect and ponder or extrapolate relationalities and contradictions in the literature or data they are working with. In this study journalling offered the researcher an opportunity to orient their thinking. Contemplation of self was evidenced in the researcher's journalling, included in the example Journal A (24 September 2019) of Figure 2. This entry was written in the initial months of enrolling in a doctoral program, where already trustworthiness was highlighted as a consideration. Illuminated in this entry is the supportive voice of the doctoral supervisory team in suggesting the researcher consider utilising the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955) as a means of understanding positioning and what is known to self and others.

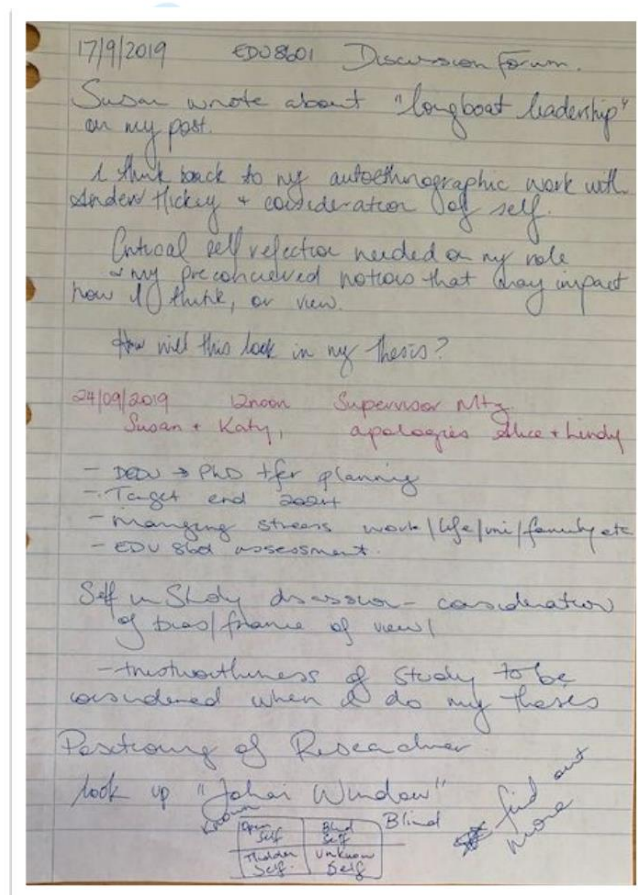


Figure 2. An image of the Researcher Journal A from 24 September 2019.

Rudman (2013) wrote about critical self-reflection of those in embedded in positions of power within their research context. Employing a process of critical self-reflection compelled the researcher's own reflexive examination of assumptions that lead to an appreciation for and pursuit of alternative perspectives. In order to facilitate this process, to scrutinize their own self-awareness, and raise methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz, 2017) the researcher chose to utilize the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955). Adopting this process helped to explicate and make transparent the researcher's positionality (Clarke, 2005). Journaling throughout this project grounded the researcher's reflexive deliberations. The technique encouraged a review of methodological assumptions, cognisant of worldviews, cultural sensitivities, power, privilege, and subjectivities (Drummond, 2020; West et al., 2022).

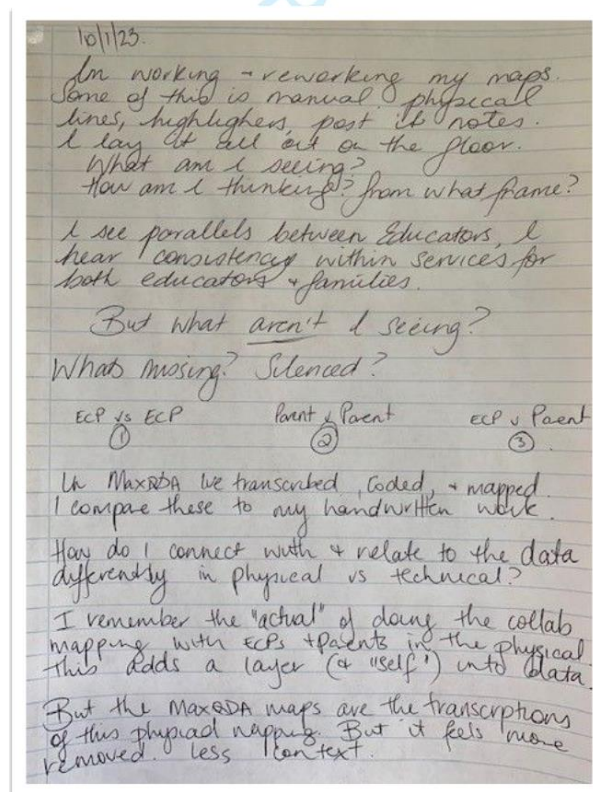


Figure 3. An image of the Researcher Journal B from 10 January 2023

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4 Much later in the doctoral journey, as seen in Figure 3, a Researcher Journal from 10
5 January 2023, the researcher offered provocations (to self) around the positioning of self and
6 the nature of their engagement with the data. Demonstrated within this journalling was the
7 researcher pondering different ways to make sense of the data depending on the manner in
8 which they engaged with it. Cartographic maps utilized in Author A's method were
9 manipulated physically and digitally throughout the data analysis process. The journal entry
10 in Figure 3 highlights the researcher's consideration of how these ways of working with the
11 data influenced and impacted what she saw, and ultimately didn't explicitly see in the data.
12 Illuminated in the findings it considered sites of silence not gleaned from a superficial
13 reading of the data. In consideration of its impact on trustworthiness, the researcher
14 deliberated over how the data was consumed, worked, and reworked (through which lens and
15 with what instrument). Applying these deliberations to a metaphor offered the researcher a
16 sensemaking tool, both for themselves, and for communicating this to others.

17 ***Meta-JMM Phase 2: Applying the Metaphor***

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19 Visual and creative methods of reasoning “improve metacognition by encouraging a
20 different way of thinking” (Bower et al., 2022: 946). In this research, applying the metaphor
21 of *a bridge over a river* to the researcher's journalling aided in interpretive responsiveness
22 and consideration of self within the research situation. Increasing trustworthiness as Bower
23 et al. (2022) found, the use of metaphor was effective in illuminating the researcher's role.
24 The visual metaphor below in Figure 4 represented the lens through which the study was
25 viewed. Within the *eye is a person* (the researcher) *casting a net* (the research method) from
26 *the bridge* (the research design) into *the river* (research situation) to retrieve *fish* (the data).
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30 The positioning of the researcher within the context of the inquiry was as an active
31 participant and research instrument was supported by the theoretical framework and research
32 design (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013; Clarke, 2005). In this study, the poststructural framework
33 and Situational Analysis (SA) method embraced the complex positionality of the researcher
34 as instrument and participant while demanding reflexivity (Clarke et al., 2016; Clarke and
35 Braun, 2018; den Outer et al., 2013; Kahn, 2014). SA repositions the researcher from *all*
36 *knowing* to *acknowledged participant* in the production of knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln,
37 2017; Clarke, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 2002).
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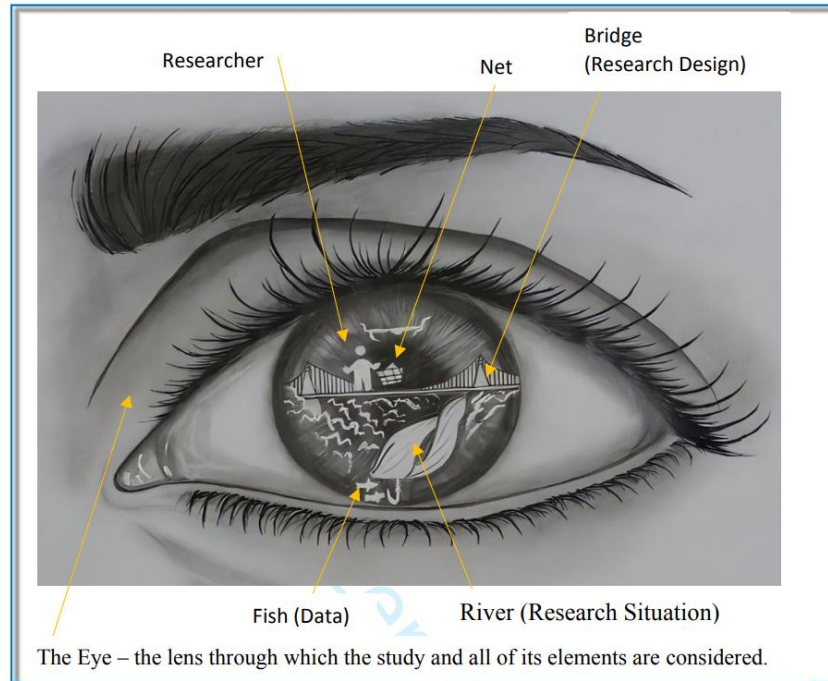


Figure 4. A visual depiction of the metaphor representing the lens through which the study is viewed. Within the eye is a person (the researcher) casting a net from the bridge (the research design) into the river (research situation) to retrieve fish (the data).

The metaphor will briefly be deconstructed here to give context to its application as part of the Meta-JMM technique in the researchers poststructural case study.

The River – Encapsulated in the image of the river is the entirety of the *situation*, inclusive of all that is in and around the research field (Clarke, 2003). It provided for a broad conceptualisation of all that encompassed and influenced the phenomenon. Focusing too narrowly on one element of a research situation is to fracture it from its relations to other elements (Kalenda, 2016). The river system aspect of the metaphor therefore included the currents (i.e., synergies present in the study), the varying water salinity (i.e., the rabbit holes a researcher can go down that are not explicitly related to the study) and clarity (i.e., conceptual alignment), the riverbed (i.e., the supportive comments and feedback that others give that enhanced the study). Using this metaphor enhanced metacognition by acting as a sense making tool that provided clarity in thinking.

The Bridge – Providing the perspective from above the river, the bridge being understood as a solid framework on which to rely. In this metaphor the research paradigm and philosophical orientation were the detailed structural components of the bridge that collectively provide strength to the framework, and reliability for the researcher to stand and view the study.

The Researcher – Walking onto this bridge, the researcher was reminded of the strength of the bridge, not just its individual components but how collectively they provided an infallible framework to trust. Casting the net from the bridge, hauling data from the river below, the researcher steadied themselves with resolve.

Others on the Bridge – People are encountered by the researcher on the bridge. Encounters included people who coaxed from the further ahead, perhaps a critical friend who steadied the researcher hand as they nervously peered over the edge (i.e., Doctoral Supervisors). Some others may have not yet ventured onto the bridge, but from where the researcher stood, they had the capacity to share what they experience, giving others confidence to step out also, to experience it for themselves (i.e., other researchers or educators in the field).

The Data (seen) – Casting and retrieving data in their net, the researcher noted the different varieties, sizes, shapes, and colours of fish they'd caught. Acknowledging at the same time, the net had flaws. What if it had been too light to catch the fish at the bottom of the river? What if the weave had been too wide to capture the smallest fish? What if there were more than fish... how would they haul in a turtle? What of the rocks that couldn't be lifted in the net, how were these considered?

The Data (unseen) – In this study unseen data was acknowledged by the researcher with the river full of life and activity, below what is easily seen on the water's surface such as the fish in the net. The application of the metaphor assisted the researcher in considering what was silenced as well as what was unseen.

Understanding that metacognitive processes are situated and relational, Mahdavi (2014) wrote that they are "highly influenced by one's goals, motivations, perceptions of ability, attributions, and beliefs, as well as context, such as social and cultural norms" (p. 532). In this case study, the early career researcher spent a great deal of time reflecting on their true self as a researcher and the influence of their ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs. It was important to the researcher for their philosophical orientations to

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3 align with the poststructural interpretive case study that was evolving. What eventuated from
4 the Meta-JMM technique of journalling and applying a metaphor was a research design that
5 offered a critically multilayered consideration of the phenomenon that harnessed the messy
6 complexities of lived experiences towards the co-construction of knowledge.
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11 While journalling can serve as a creative outlet, it is also a place to intensely bury
12 oneself in the conceptualisation, theory, and practice of *doing* research (Orientation phase).
13 The application of this thinking to the metaphor allows for deep contemplation of the
14 relationships between layers of the study (Deliberation phase). In order to enhance the
15 trustworthiness of a study, the metacognitive processes undertaken here must be tangibly
16 exemplified, which can be achieved through the use of the Researcher Memo (Fortification
17 phase).
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23 ***Meta-JMM Phase 3: The Researcher Memo***

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25 A Researcher Memo articulates the act of resolving the metacognitive deliberations
26 experienced by the researcher in the earlier phases of the Meta-JMM technique. Its intent is to
27 make visible the results of the sensemaking processes engaged in through critical reflection
28 and journalling, and through the application of this to a metaphor. Metacognitive awareness
29 is reflexive and a self-regulation of one's own understandings and knowledge. Jagals and van
30 der Walt (2016) stated "metacognition can therefore be viewed as an individual's own
31 facilitation of knowledge and management of one's thinking" (p. 156). The two Researcher
32 Memos offered as examples here were incorporated as interjections throughout a thesis
33 methodology and data chapters.
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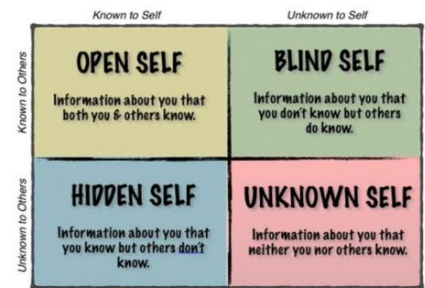
42 These Researcher Memos helped to capture the higher order metacognitive skills of
43 the researcher, and in doing so offered transparency for the study, increasing trustworthiness.
44 This evidenced the manner in which the researcher positioned self in the study and how the
45 researcher interacted with the data throughout the study. Figure 5 Researcher Memo follows
46 on from the earliest Journal musings (previous Figure 2) and evidences the practice of
47 journalling, use of Johari Window, and the interweaving of these as decision that are
48 supported by an alignment with the philosophical orientation and research design of the
49 study.
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Researcher Memo:

A caveat of SA is researcher reflexivity. As an insider researcher, like every human, I have preconceived ideas, a set of beliefs, a foundation of my own knowledge and experiences that I carry with me. If life, for the most part, this is a useful toolbox. However, as a researcher I need to be weary, conscious, and accepting of these. I undertake researcher journalling to keep my mind and my intentions clear. Throughout every stage of this journey, I journal. Prior to my confirmation of candidature, in conceptualising this study I began using the Johari Window (a suggestion made by my Associate Supervisor Susan in my first semester as a Doctoral Student) and have continued this ever since. I use it when reading and formulating my thoughts. I centre myself before visiting research sites to conduct observations or interviews, and following these, to debrief also.

Journalling, utilisation of the Johari Window Model (Ramani et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017), supports researcher reflexivity. Positioning the researcher within the research aligns with the goals and theoretical framework of this study. Trustworthiness of data is supported by the methodology, methods and analysis tools that align to the consistently robust theoretical paradigm informing this research. I have continued journalling through the data collection and analysis phase, particularly in the co-construction of meaning with participants, where this included memos during relational mapping phase.



Johari Window [Do you see the forest or the trees? Clinical reasoning and the KFP. - Medical Education Experts \(mededexperts.com.au\)](https://mededexperts.com.au/)

Figure 5. Image depicts is an example of a Researcher Memo inserted into Methodology chapter of PhD thesis.

Similarly, later in the data analysis phases of the researcher's poststructural case study, Figure 6 exemplified the metacognitive process of the researcher grappling with her

own thinking. Here the Researcher Memo offered explicit insight into the researcher's thinking, and consideration for ways of working with the data. Furthermore, the memo brought to light authenticity in the researcher's intent to embed the research design and underpinning theoretical positioning in every decision, including the lens through which literature and data were viewed. With the transparency captured in this memo, also came the exploration of the researchers' vulnerabilities. The researcher's interaction with the data being overlayed with the assertions made in the literature, evidenced the researcher's decree that they had reached saturation. Exposure of the behind-the-scenes processes that are brought to light through the Meta-JMM technique enhanced the trustworthiness of the study



Researcher Memo:

Frustrated with working and reworking my maps and the intensity of overlaying elements, social worlds and arena boundaries, I returned to some of the literature. Meszaros et al. (2019) wrote:

"Researchers must grapple with the complexities inherent within the studied situation and resist characterizing issues as linear outcomes. By attending to complex systems, researchers are now dealing with nonlinear systems—systems where outcomes are not directly proportional to inputs or changes in the causal elements (Meszaros et al., 2019: 2)"

Thinking about the social worlds, their interactions with other worlds, and boundaries, I really understand more deeply now why Grzanka (2020) wrote about avoiding tacit assumptions. It's so important here. Mapping, remapping, reviewing, seeing the gaps, looking for the silences.... While the process is data driven, with SAs underpinnings embedded in poststructural traditions the opportunity to celebrate multiple truths is liberating. Endurance is needed in performing SA. It's manual and intensive. Whilst software and technologies are available, and certainly have power and a place in research analyses, this feels much more about the relationship between the researcher and their data – it's almost sacred. .Levitt et al. (2017) call it high fidelity! And eventually I reach saturation.

effectively.

Figure 6. An image of a Researcher Memo inserted into the data analysis chapter of the doctoral thesis.

CONCLUSION

Illustration through each phase of the Meta-JMM technique, the use of journaling, metaphor and memos offers a manner by which to support the articulation of a researcher's thinking about thinking (metacognition) as they move through each phase of their study. A poststructural perspective through which to consider the use of metaphor resonated with, Koro-Ljungberg (2004) who highlighted "the importance of a researcher's conceptual and theoretical connections and their impact on any analytical method used in educational research" (p. 358). Likewise, from an interpretive paradigm Bartley and Brooks (2021) saw it necessary to apply a metaphor to the complete phenomenon, enabled by understanding the metaphor applied to the sum of its parts. This process affords observational and interview data to be analysed through the philosophical underpinnings for the purposes of meaning making (Bartley and Brooks, 2021). Utilizing the Meta-Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM) technique in qualitative studies is a novel method of evidencing researcher metacognition to enhance the trustworthiness in qualitative studies. The authors invite feedback on this technique.

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17/9/2019 ED08601 Discussion Forum.
 Susan wrote about "longboat leadership" on my post.
 I think back to my autoethnographic work with students Hickey + consideration of self.
 Critical self-reflection needed on my role + my pre-conceived notions that may impact how I think, or view.
 How will this look in my thesis?

24/09/2019 12noon Supervisor Mtg.
 Susan + Katy, apologies Alice + Andy.

- Dean → PhD + fr planning
- Target end 2021
- Managing stress work/life/fun/family etc
- EDU 860 assessment.

Self in Study discussion - consideration of bias/frame of view!

- trustworthiness of study to be considered when I do my thesis

Positioning of Researcher

look up "Jahai Window"

Open Self	Blind Self
Hidden Self	Unknown Self

Blind find out none

Figure 2. An image of the Researcher Journal A from 24 September 2019.

111x162mm (96 x 96 DPI)

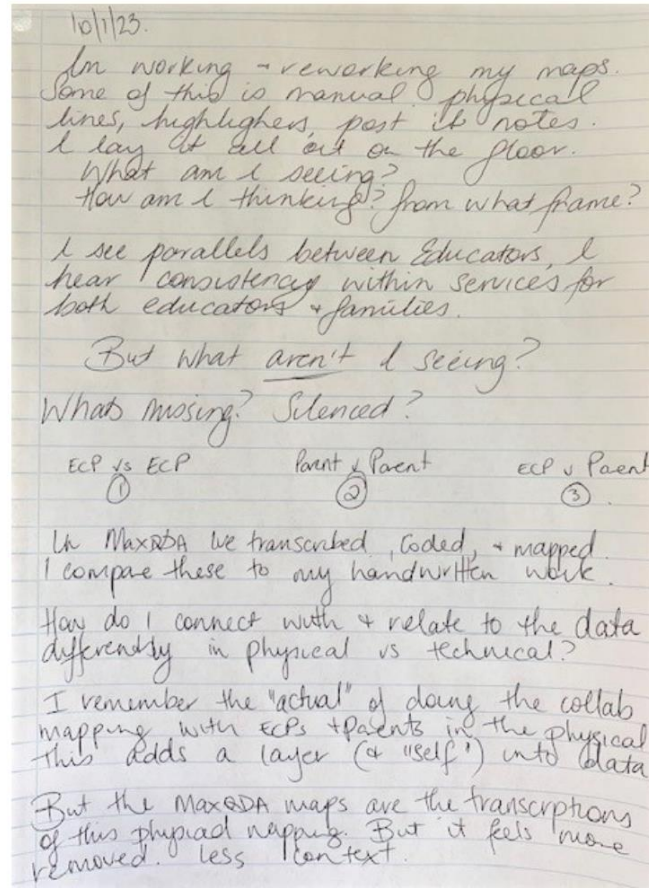


Figure 3. An image of the Researcher Journal B from 10 January 2023

122x169mm (96 x 96 DPI)

6.3. Links and Implications

Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research

[under review] offers the Meta-JMM technique to the research and ethics field for discussion and critique. This novel approach to enhancing trustworthiness through a display of metacognitive processes is insightful and builds on existing literature in nuanced ways. The article exposes methodological practices undertaken throughout the current research project and illuminates their value in enhancing trustworthiness. Evidencing the attainment of trustworthiness and reliability in qualitative studies remains an elusive goal for researchers. Techniques such as Meta-JMM offer new and dynamic methods by which to achieve both trustworthiness and reliability.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

High quality, successful collaborative partnerships have been established as positively impacting outcomes for children, and the quality of early childhood education and care services (Kambouri et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2023; Murphy et al., 2021). However, an existing lack of clarity around the interpretation of collaborative partnership's enactment in the field highlighted the need to dive deeper into their components, and actualisation in practice. This study sought to address this concern by exploring: i) educator and family perspectives on collaborative partnerships; ii) evidence of interactions and collaborative partnerships; and iii) identification of key components and inclusions of high-quality collaborative partnerships.

Three research questions guided the poststructural case study investigation. These were:

RQ 1 - How do educators and families describe their experiences of collaborative partnerships?

RQ2 - How do educators and families interact in ways that evidence collaborative partnerships? and

RQ3- What are the key components and inclusions that reflect high quality collaborative partnerships?

Data to inform these goals and associated questions was gained through observations, semi structured interviews, and situational analysis mapping. This chapter will articulate key insights from the study's findings, and their contribution to current literature on collaborative partnerships in early childhood. As this dissertation is presented as a Thesis by Publication, small pertinent extracts of raw data will be disseminated throughout this discussion chapter to support the articulation of

findings and insights. The details of participants and sample are provided again in Table 7.1 for the reader's reference.

Table 7.1

Participants and Sample

ECEC Service	Gumnut Childcare Private not for profit community managed, 50 children, Inner City		Indigo House Private not for profit other organisation, 175 children, Inner City		Mountain Kids Private for profit, 99 children, Regional	
Stakeholder role	ECP	Parent	ECP	Parent	ECP	Parent
Stakeholder name	Chelsea	Surish	Silvia	Dina	Marta	Naomi

7.1. Descriptions of High-Quality Collaborative Partnerships

The first goal of this study was to investigate stakeholders' perspectives of collaborative partnerships through a description in their own words. This goal was motivated by the opportunity to extend upon the paucity of existing research. Two insights that emerged from this project, and how they inform Research Question 1, will now be addressed in further detail and include: i) the importance of embedded and alive philosophies being actively utilised by ECEC service stakeholders in their language, in their actions, and in ECEC learning spaces; and the importance of the formulation and harnessing of remarkable relationships between stakeholders, especially educators and families.

7.1.1 *Embedded and Alive Philosophies*

Motivated by goal one of the study, to investigate ECP and families' experiences of collaborative partnerships in services rated as Exceeding the NQS in QA6 'Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities', the first insight was how stakeholder descriptions illuminated embedded and alive philosophies that operated at their service and the positive contribution this made to collaborative

partnerships. In this study, the term embedded referred to the way in which the practices and or the interactions were consistent, interwoven, and ingrained. Alive was understood to represent this embeddedness through a presence of the philosophy as being articulated in the language spoken by stakeholders, as well as reflected in the actions of stakeholders and their intentionality in the design and use of spaces within their services (see Figure 7.1 – Embedded and Alive Philosophies). This strong presence, authenticity, and distinct alignment between the service philosophy, the educator, and the family existed across all three case sites.

Figure 7.1

Embedded and Alive Philosophies

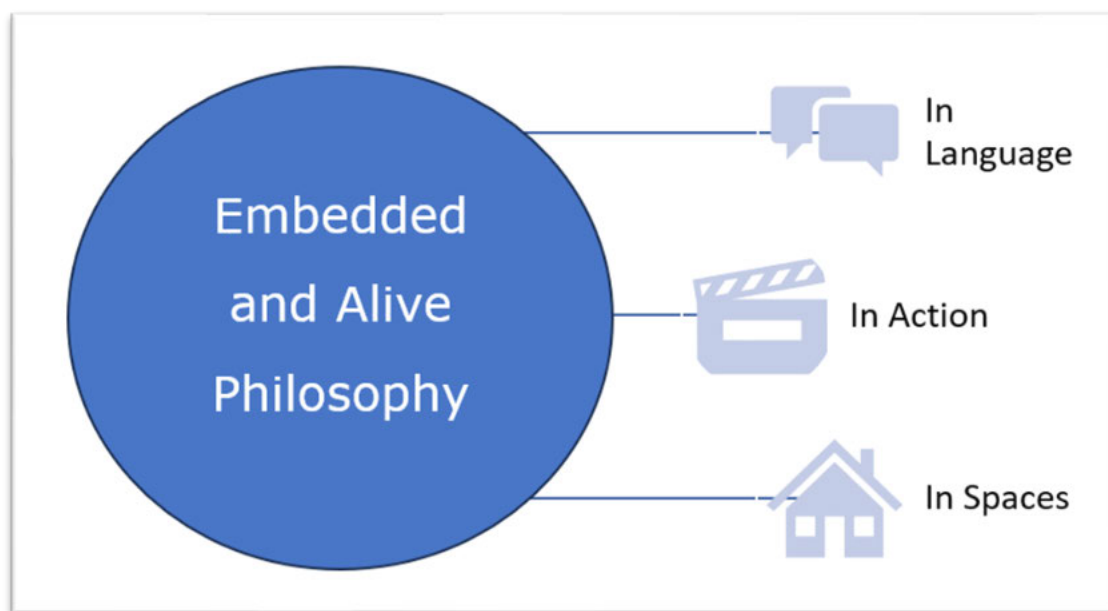


Figure 7.1 captures how participants surfaced reference to the embedded and alive philosophies within their service through: examples of the language adopted, in practices actioned, and in spaces throughout the service. For example, in describing collaborative partnerships, a common thread was an embedded and alive philosophy that was evidenced **in language** stakeholders adopted through the vocabulary associated with their ECEC service philosophy, with reference to terms such as “emergent”, “curious”, “capable”, and individualised in their everyday conversations

and engagements. Naomi, a parent at Mountain Kids commented on the “sense of belonging and culture” of the service. She further explained to demonstrate this in action through her experiences when arriving at the service, commenting that there was a “sense of belonging and that culture that the girls at the front desk, you know they kind of provide that and then you walk through [to classrooms] and it’s provided again”.

Another thread to emerge from stakeholder descriptions of collaborative partnerships was how the embedded and alive philosophy was evidenced **in action**. Detailing of embedded and alive philosophies emerged through stakeholder descriptions of practices by parents and educators that reflected and aligned with the service philosophy. Examples of embedded and alive philosophies included educators providing nurturing care of infants and facilitating supported transitions at drop off times through modelling expectations, processes, and articulating their actions for children (by both educators and families). Mother of two, Naomi’s previous quote detailed what the culture and sense of belonging looked like in practice with the service, offering evidence of consistency to routines. Educators, such Martha, Director and Educational Leader, also described the philosophy in action commenting,

“We have done a lot of reflections, critical reflections, from our relationship with our families.... ensuring that we are available...being in tune with every family, like what they’re doing in their personal world as much as what the children are doing in our world. It’s maintaining that ongoing relationship and connection and conversation.... we use that feedback from families as our critical reflections to improve our practice. Having a deep understanding and respect for the knowledge each stakeholder has of the child when sharing information.”

In action, Martha demonstrated how the service philosophy that centred around relationships with families, was actualised in her approach to being physically available for families in the foyer at peak transitional times. As a parent, Naomi could articulate the consistency of this culture of availability and connection as being experienced not just by the leadership team at the front desk, but also through to the action and engagements with classroom educators. These descriptions by stakeholders evidence their experiences of collaborative partnerships, the first goal of this study.

An additional insight was stakeholders articulating how embedded and alive philosophies were evidenced **in spaces** within the early year setting. This included educators and families' describing ways in which spaces reflected the values of the service, facilitating and affirming the philosophy. Their descriptions included educators creating an "orderly arrangement" (Silvia) of indoor and outdoor play spaces, evidencing the influence of the Montessori philosophy of Indigo House. In reference to connecting the philosophy to the spaces, and the impact on collaborative partnerships, Martha explained "our philosophy is very much at the centre of that... our relationships with our families.... The consistency and that trust enable families to have ownership over their space as well as feel that sense of belonging in bringing their children here". Stakeholder's descriptions of the influence, use and meaning of spaces informed the first goal of this study, highlighting their relevance to considerations of collaborative partnerships.

Table 7.2

Embedded and Alive Philosophy Data

Embedded and Alive Philosophy						
	Gumnut Childcare		Indigo House		Mountain Kids	
	ECP	Parent	ECP	Parent	ECP	Parent
	Chelsea	Surish	Silvia	Dina	Marta	Naomi
In Language	"you work here because of the love of the children and of the love of the family"	"everybody feels like family. In my culture we do everything together"	"the child has an orderly environment then they will feel that internal order"	"it's a combination of things, I think the environment.. but then I think then it's the community"	"Our relationships with families and sense of security"	"that sense of belonging and culture the staff provide"
In Action	Consistency in routines, spaces and people by both educators and families					
In Spaces	Availability: the physical presence of educators and leaders Environment: acknowledgement of the purposeful use of spaces and environments					

An embedded and alive philosophy was an important insight that was strongly evidenced as educators and families communicated their experiences of collaborative partnerships using the language that underpinned the centre philosophy. Table 7.2 provides data that evidences the alignment between educator and family and their service philosophy, and the consistency across all three case sites regarding the nature of embedded and alive philosophies in language, in action and in spaces. Participants described the interactions that perpetuated the philosophy in action and articulated how the ECEC space facilitated this. Families and educators described that when working together, they experienced high quality collaborative partnerships in practice, based on a shared commitment to a way of working. Stakeholders from each service articulated their experiences and perspective as participants in collaborative partnerships. Describing their alignment with and subscription to their individual service's values and philosophy, the participants of the study articulated that their service's individual approach resonated with them. It is worthy of mention that each participant ECEC service philosophy was vastly different, one being faith based, another Montessori, and the third took an

Abecedarian approach (Ailwood et al., 2016; Fleeer & van Oers, 2018; Sparling & Meunier, 2019). A strong alignment to an embedded and alive philosophy emerged from the data as serving to strengthen high quality collaborative partnerships in practice through language, action, and spaces.

Describing their experiences of successful collaborative partnerships, stakeholders reiterated the positive implications of being “on the same page” (Naomi). This congruence provides an allegiance to the service philosophy as a way of working, supporting the shared trajectory of collaborative partnership initiatives between educators and families. Descriptions by participant stakeholders provided an understanding of how embedded and alive philosophies were actualised, and the strength that came from stakeholders who align with the service philosophy. Silvia an ECP in the infant room from Indigo House said,

“ ...part of the Montessori philosophy is, that the children, they take in so much from their environment. When the child has an orderly environment then they will feel that internal order. So, I think having that consistency and feeling safe in the environment will help them to regulate their emotions...”

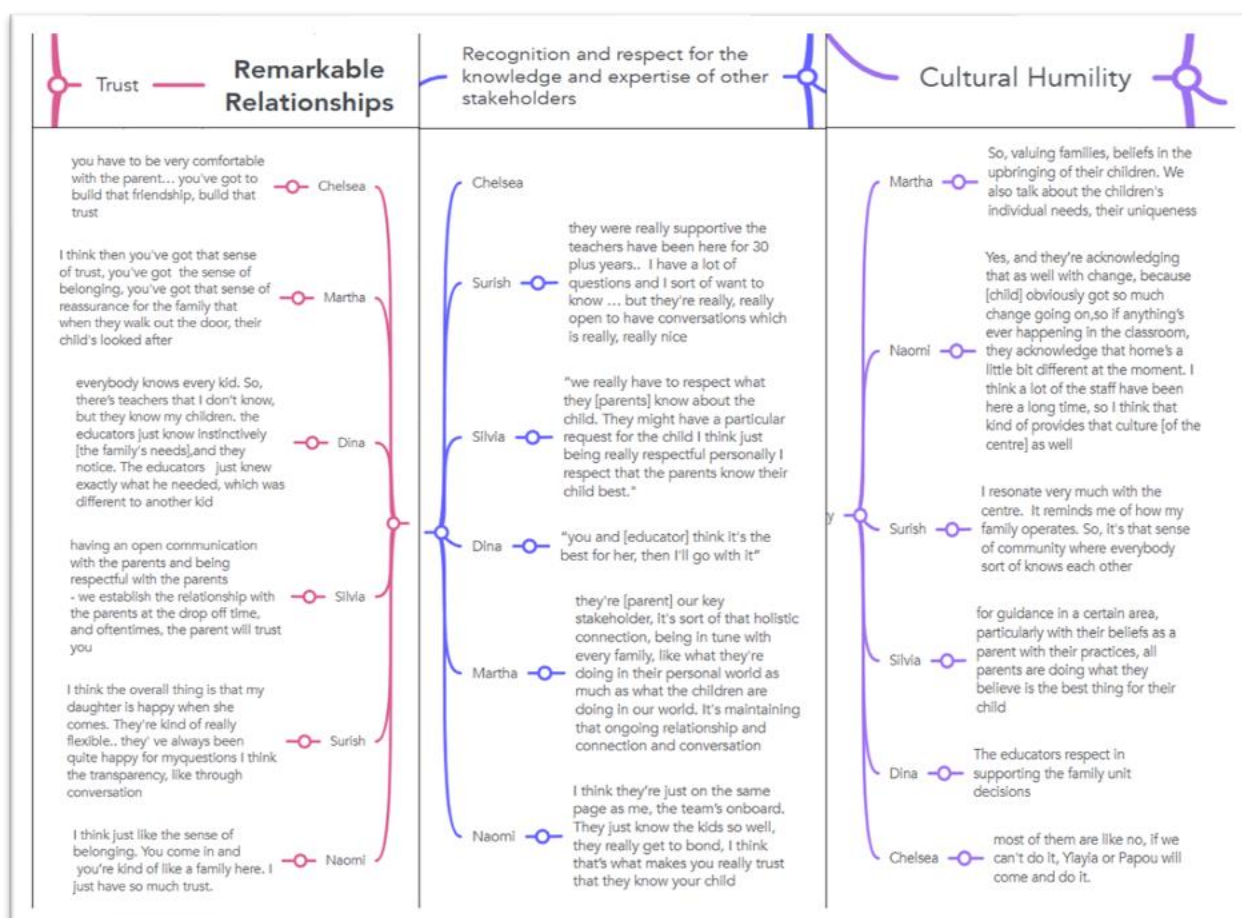
Silvia articulated a deep embedding and alignment with her service philosophy as this quote shows her connection with an embedded and alive philosophy in the **language** she used (e.g., “internal order”), in her **actions** (e.g., “consistent practices”) and her consideration of **spaces** (e.g., “layout of environments”).

A comment by Dina, a parent also at Indigo House, also described her alignment with that same philosophy, stating “I think it’s a combination of things. I think the environment is obviously one. The kids love the [name of centre space] and I find since they start going out there, the risk taking is increasing, which is good to

see in my opinion". An embedded and alive nature of Indigo House's philosophy was demonstrated through Dina's use of language (e.g., "risk taking"), in action ("the kids love the [space]"), and spaces (i.e., "environment"). A clear alignment between the philosophy of Indigo House, and stakeholders Dina (parent) and Silvia (educator) is evidenced through its embedded and alive nature. In turn, this congruence created a strong foundational common ground, and consistent narrative, that enabled and fostered high quality collaborative partnerships. Stakeholders further attributed the prominence of the philosophy as providing for their sense of belonging and connectedness, to creating the culture of the service, and the development of a likeminded community.

The embedded and alive nature of the service philosophy emerged as a key theme in the descriptions of collaborative partnerships from all stakeholders and case sites in this study, in reference to the language and the actions stakeholders adopted as part of regular practice, and in the spaces they created. Informing goal one of this study the first insight, embedded and alive philosophies, provided a more holistic interpretation of collaborative partnerships by stakeholders. One which encompassed an understanding of the power of a philosophy that is embedded and alive in language, in action and in spaces, towards achieving these high-quality collaborative partnerships with shared vision and decision making. This interpretation extends upon existing literature where reference is made to the need for shared vision and shared decision-making processes towards the achievement of the collective goal (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012; Laletas et al., 2018; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). With these nuanced insights and understandings supporting improved practices in the field, the value and importance of stakeholders who align with a philosophy that is embedded and alive in the

Enlarged Sections of Remarkable Relationships Theme Quotes by Participants



The Remarkable Relationships Framework (Figure 7.4) captures key themes from these descriptions. These themes and the ways in which they extend upon existing literature on collaborative partnership components will now be discussed.

Forefronting the Remarkable Relationships Framework at the outset of this discussion is intended to support the reader through the meaning making that led to the insight, resulting in the conceptualisation of this framework.

Descriptions of the remarkable relationships between educator and family emerged as a second insight related to Goal 1, reaffirming the collaborative nature of the supportive relationship that existed within each of the three ECEC services. In this study both parents and educators' descriptions illuminated a deep respect for the knowledge each other held of the child, and the way in which the collaborative

approaches adopted were synergistic, with the overarching goal of the betterment of child outcomes. As educator Silvia explains, “we really have to respect what they [parents] know about the child and [parents] are mindful that the way their child interacts at home could be completely different to how they interact [at the ECEC service]”. Displaying her respect for the professional knowledge and expertise of the educators when planning to progress her child to an older room Dina explained “[Director] said, we want to put her in [classroom name], [educator] and I think it's the best place for her. I said, well, if you and [educator] think it's the best place for her, then I'll go with it”. These stakeholder descriptions of genuine interactions and practices reflect a respect for each other’s knowledge and expertise, formulating remarkable relationships that foster high quality collaborative partnerships.

Figure 7.4

Remarkable Relationships Framework



These remarkable relationship insights are captured in the framework in Figure 7.4, the first part of which reflects the multi-perspective viewpoints. These insights build on research conducted by Vlasov and Hujala (2017) by harnessing the knowledge, expertise and cultural humility of stakeholders in contributing to the understandings of the child around whom they collaborate. Further, these remarkable relationships insight extends on earlier work by Mason et al. (2023) in terms of harnessing perceived power imbalances between stakeholders in a positive light, developing these into capacity building opportunities that break down barriers to successful collaborative partnerships. The remarkable relationships insight informs Goal 1 of this study as the skills and expertise of stakeholders were promoted not only as individual skills that contributed to collaborative partnerships but were used in capacity building and mutual learning opportunities for others.

Across the three case sites stakeholders described collaborative partnerships in terms of how the skills, knowledge, and expertise of each parent and educator contributed to positive outcomes. For example, Dina, parent from Indigo House explained her respect for the knowledge and approach by educators: “the educators just know instinctively...they just do it without even having to ask or do anything, the educators fit in with our team... I guess it's that respect in supporting the family unit and the decisions of the family”. Likewise, educator Martha from Mountain Kids explains from her experience of the collaborative partnership with families:

“We take the time to get to know our families. ...in building connections. We become all those things in those multi-faceted positions we're in of listening, counselling, being available, sharing our knowledge. So, valuing families, beliefs in the upbringing of their children. Finding that balance. So, there's a lot of

aspects where we're building those connections and negotiating between the home and the centre."

Stakeholders articulated descriptions that reinforced educator and families' experiences and perspectives of collaborative partnerships. Stakeholders articulated the impact of their remarkable relationships by way of respecting each other's contributions, facilitating a sharing of knowledge.

Participant evidenced their cultural humility that supported sensitive and respectful relationships (Hannon & O'Donnell, 2021; Rossetti et al., 2018), previously described by Drummond (2020) as relational ways of knowing. Cultural humility in this study referred to openness participants had to others' beliefs and world views (Hook et al., 2013). Understandings by stakeholders of their own positioning, and consideration for others' beliefs and ways of working supported endeavours to collaborate. The open two-way relationship between educator and family emerged from the data as an insight that encouraged recognition of each other's unique contribution toward a common goal in collaborative partnerships. This was achieved by stakeholders sensitively embracing diverse perspectives and a multi-perspective view.

These remarkable relationships insight further develops previous research by interweaving stakeholders' cultural capacity, with knowledge and expertise to inform the multi-perspective collaborative partnership approach in the remarkable relationships framework. Informing the first goal of this study, the remarkable relationships framework provided insight into how the personal characteristics (such as willingness or persistence) of stakeholders foster their ability to build and maintain **trust** in collaborative partnerships (Akhtar et al., 2019), (Bordogna, 2020), (Hartman, 2018). Identified by this study, the development and presence of trust contributes a

significant portion of the remarkable relationship. Martha (an educator at Mountain Kids) prefaces its attainment by saying “...it's not an easy thing to develop that trust or that connection”. The following discussion provides evidence of the mechanisms by which participants of this study developed trust in collaborative partnerships, and the contribution of this insight towards the remarkable relationship framework.



A key insight that emerged from stakeholders' reference to successful partnerships related to remarkable factors evidenced with the ECEC setting that supported the development of trust.

There is significant literature that refers to trust as an essential component of successful collaborative partnerships (Hartman, 2018; MacNaughton, 2011; Peck et al., 2015; Phillipson, 2017; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017), and the EYLF (Australia's approved learning framework) referring to genuine partnerships as building trust in each stakeholder through relational pedagogies (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a). However, there still exists a paucity in literature relating to the potential mechanisms for developing and maintaining trust, particularly in ECEC contexts.

Table 7.3 outlines participants' descriptions that capture the four antecedents to trust. These were identified by participants that they perceived to facilitate the development of trust in relationships towards successful collaborative partnerships. These were: consistency, communication, availability, and respect and support. The conceptualisation of these elements being termed antecedents was conceived from a description by Chelsea* Educator at Gumnut Childcare* who explained “that sense of trust comes from those things as like a layer underneath creating that [trust]”.

Antecedents therefore articulate stakeholders' consideration of factors that precede and cumulatively develop to afford for trust in collaborative partnerships.

Table 7.3

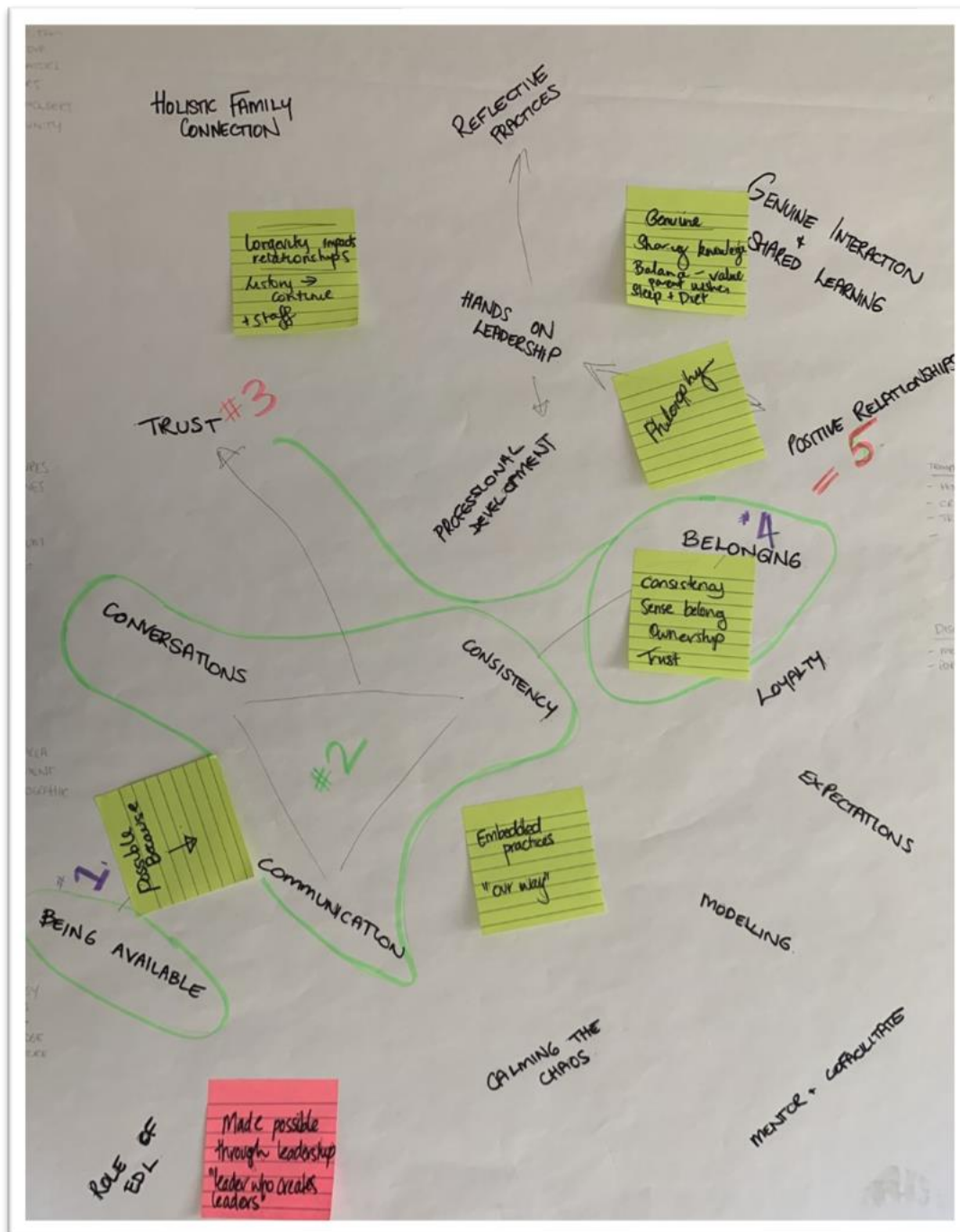
Participants Descriptions

Antecedent	Participant	Evidence Quote
Consistency	Martha* Educator at Mountain Kids* Interview 2	"the consistency and that trust enable families to have ownership over their space as feel that sense of belonging"
Communication	Naomi* Parent at Mountain Kids* Interview 2	"The communication, I guess, builds that trust... a huge amount of trust because they know your child".
Availability	Dina* Parent at Indigo House* Interview 1	"[Directors name] are out in the foyer... all the time.. just there, ready to be"
Respect & Support	Dina* Parent at Indigo House* Interview 2	"that respect... it just builds trust"

While the quotes in Table 7.3 detail data from semi structured interviews, it was the collaborative relational mapping during the second interviews with each participant that significantly drew out the notion of antecedents as a finding, and in doing so helped to harness the connection and significance of these elements for stakeholders in their own words (see Figure 7.3 as an example). In this map Martha (from Mountain Kids), in her second interview, referred to connections between consistency and trust, during collaborative situational (relational) mapping with the researcher, where she physically drew connections between a range of elements on the map. Martha commented "so trust - that's interconnected. So being available, having the communication - which are the conversations - is showing that's embedded... consistency, which builds trust and belonging". The situational (relational) map referred to in this example is provided for context in Figure 7.5.

Figure 7.5

Martha's Situational (Relational) Map



Both educators and families reiterated experiences of these continual and foundational antecedents (see Figure 7.6) as culminating to provide the trust needed to collaborate. Insights from the first goal of this study suggest that the antecedents of consistency, communication, availability, and respect and support unite to provide a necessary foundation to the development of trust, evidenced as essential to

successful collaborative partnerships. It became clear, through observations taken in this study, that when educators and parents enacted these antecedents in a bi-directional manner, they defused knowledge silos. In doing so, they broke down and eliminated a barrier to collaborative partnerships previously illuminated by Baumber et al. (2020). The elevation of stakeholder capabilities encouraged by Polk and Knutsson (2008) are extended by this study's insight, through the bi-directional capacity building nature of the remarkable relationships framework.

Figure 7.6

Antecedents to Trusting Relationships



Descriptions of collaborative partnership experiences by participants of this study highlighted how educators and parents lifted each other up by respecting each other as having expertise and knowledge of the child that complimented, rather than competed. This mutual respect and affirming of mutual interests and contribution leading to greater outcomes for the child. These remarkable relationships insights build upon and nuance other studies due to the strengths-based perspective in which collaborative partnerships were viewed in this study. Particularly this was evidenced when each stakeholder was championed for their acumen, and each offered an upskilling and sharing of knowledge and experience.

The remarkable relationships insight that informed the first goal of this study, exposed educator and family descriptions of their experiences of collaborative partnerships. Previous research by Fenech et al. (2019), Alasuutari (2010), and Vlasov and Hujala (2017) concluded that educators who position themselves as an expert in authoritative, dictating, or top down hierarchical approaches hampered collaborative partnership efforts between educator and families. Fenech et al. (2019) found that educators' intentionality in collaborating was greater in those with higher levels of qualification. Conversely however, it was revealed in the findings of the current study, that the lesser qualified and experienced of the educator participants Silvia described with great insight the value of remarkable relationships and the empowerment of both stakeholders in contributing to collaborative partnerships. Her connection with the service philosophy and enactment of this in her engagements with families appeared more influential on her collaborative partnerships than her qualifications. This insight enhanced previous research nuancing considerations of experience and qualification by addressing the relationships and connections between stakeholders.

This study challenges the existing narrative and shifts thinking away from perceptions of expert roles, or the need for one party acquiescing to the other. Waniganayake et al. (2012) had advocated for approaches to partnerships that made it possible to work in power *with*, not power *over* stakeholders. This study's remarkable relationships insights, gleaned from the data of three case sites, champions a positive power imbalance, and achieves the relational and participatory approaches previously proposed by Rouse (2012). Descriptions by participant stakeholders culminated in the remarkable relationships framework, accomplishing the first goal of this study. A shared synergy of educators and families is evidenced

in remarkable relationships and the necessary point made by Mason et al. (2023) for collaborative partnerships to move beyond the rhetoric of reciprocal relationships, to a reflexive and bidirectional understandings of educator-family interactions. The Remarkable Relationships Framework of Figure 7.2 captures stakeholders' descriptions of their experiences from multi-perspective views, harnessing their knowledge and expertise and cultural humility in a capacity building and mutual learning experience. Observations of their interactions, and the detailing of their experiences whilst undertaking participatory mapping of Situational (Relational) Maps affirmed these findings. Antecedents of consistency, communication, availability, respect and support, were evidenced to develop trusting relationships towards high quality collaborative partnerships. The first goal of this study, to investigate ECP and families' experiences of collaborative partnerships in services rated as Exceeding the NQS in QA6 'Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities', was evidenced through the insights of embedded and alive philosophies and remarkable relationships.



Researcher Memo

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr was the Senior Australian of the Year in 2021. Miriam is also an Aboriginal artist and educator, her efforts were recognised when she was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia in 1998.

*In her reflections, Miriam-Rose explains the concept of **Dadirri**. From the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri language of the Daly River region in Northern Territory of Australia. Dadirri means deep listening, respectful attention to words, feelings and experience that values and acknowledges unique viewpoints that connect people. A powerful tool for contemplation in indigenous culture (The Miriam Rose Foundation provided an email for the sharing of this reflection with the permission of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (Ngangiwumirr), from her reflections on Dadirri, January, 04, 2024 <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>)*

As an Australian, and as an educator, this conceptualisation of deep listening and the contemplative nature of Dadirri resonates with me as I consider the insights from the findings of my doctoral study. Burkardt and Thomas (2022) write about the art of skilful listening as a characteristic that increases the capacity and competence of good communicators in collaborative partnerships. As the revelations of this current study unfold so too does my need to embrace a variety of viewpoints with humility and sensitivity.

Drummond (2020) encourages an increased understanding of relational ways of knowing, being and doing from indigenous perspectives. The capacity building nature of collaborative partnerships serve to positively impact this narrative towards mutual learning. The Australian NQF outlines exceeding level practices as being informed by critical reflection and embedded across service practices that are shaped by meaningful engagements with families and community (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). Dadirri would be a wonderful practice by which to accomplish this.

7.2. Observations of High-Quality Collaborative Partnerships

The second goal of this study was to observe and investigate the interactions between educators and families in order to explore how interactions evidenced and fostered quality collaborative partnerships. Observations were taken by the researcher, recording interactions between stakeholders using the SET in Figure 7.7.

Figure 7.7

Snip of Completed SET Observation

M.K. 8/9/22 Foyer T30-9am.

Situating Evidence Tool (SET)				
Activities are goal-directed sets of actions—paths to accomplish. What are the modes people work in, and the specific	Environments include the entire arena where activities take place. What is the character and function of the space overall, of each individual's spaces, and of	Interactions are between a person and someone or something else; they are the building blocks of activities. What is the nature of routine and special interactions	Objects are building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or unintended uses (thus changing their function, meaning and context). What are the objects and devices	Users are the people whose behaviors, preferences, and needs are being observed. Who is there? What are their roles and relationships? What are their values and prejudices?
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role		
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrollment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
<i>Morning drop-off families are greeted by ECEs. ECE/DIE/2IC in foyer. Child comes around desk, chat, laughter, sign in book. Discuss the day.</i>	<i>Foyer. Narrow multi-dimension space. Access to staff, chn, parents. Transitional arrive + leave. And wings of building, kids little kids different directions. map of desk pro →</i>	<i>Families drop off routines. Staff in DIR office sign in for day. Name tag parent + child in welcome sense of knowing. Medication, forms, gloves, explained + supported. Parent ECE/DIE + 2IC.</i>	<i>Kiosk tech for sign in small space forces interaction with adult + child. Open end free desk = no barrier to DIR Displays + documents accessible to all incl chn. Child comes to sit, parent points to photos. Very social</i>	<i>Parents, child, sibling, staff, educators, ECE/DIE, 2IC. In perspective of role all engage by name. Educ talk to chn at their level. And all engage physically - high pick up + cuddle etc.</i>
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing		

Additionally, these observations informed the development of SA maps in a congruent data collection and analysis technique. The intent of this study's second goal was to illuminate high quality collaborative partnerships, and in doing so contribute to the paucity of existing observational studies related to this phenomenon, particularly in relation to ECEC. What emerged was that the influence of space; and responsive and differentiated connections were not only evidenced within these ECEC services, but strongly fostered quality collaborative partnerships. These insights will now be extrapolated further.

7.2.1. The influence of Space

A key insight that emerged from this research was the significant impact that *space* had on collaborative partnerships in all three ECEC services rated as exceeding the NQS. Grounded in architectural foundations, conceptualisations of space often make reference to components such as design, function, aesthetics, shape, form and style (Greenman & Gandini, 2005; Hanington & Martin, 2012). In early childhood settings, spaces have been promoted as powerful contributors to facilitating the growth and learning of children (Berti et al., 2019; Pairman & Dalli, 2017). Malaguzzi's approach in Reggio Emilia referred to the environment as the third teacher, conveying the prominence of space in influencing outcomes on the child as being as significant as the family and the educator (Edwards et al., 2011). For the purposes of this ongoing discussion, space is defined as a product of social construction, where the interaction of service philosophy and pedagogical values informs function and design.

Delineating the variety of terms used to explore broader educational locations from a spatial sense, Philo (2000) separates the setting, place, space, environment and landscape as separate entities. However, in this study, the researcher argues that the combined nature of physical, geographic, and social engagements in early childhood spaces requires their assemblage. Interactions observed as influencing and fostering collaborative partnership are socially situated, occurring across a variety of settings, places, and environments, and as such, are encompassed herein under one banner of space.

As this study was undertaken in Australia, it is of value to understand the influence of the country's guiding framework and curricula for ECEC. These documents, under National Quality Framework (NQF) banner, encourage a focus on

the development of safe and inviting spaces for children and families (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a; Berti et al., 2019; Kambouri et al., 2021). The design of numerous aspects of ECEC services are mandated by the NQF (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023) and the National Construction Code (Australian Building Codes Board, 2022). These prescriptions include details on places intended to facilitate and support collaborative partnerships by providing space for ECPs and families to interact. The NQF outlines in specific detail numerous requirements under the Education and Care Services National Regulations¹. These regulations and building codes set the foundation and are respected parameters that set minimum obligations for ECEC building and licence requirements. What follows is a discussion that expands on the influence of space (See Figure 7.8, The influence of space on ECEC collaborative partnerships) that expands on the ways in which these spaces were utilised, and how the practices within these spaces positively impacted on interactions and by association, supported or enhanced collaborative partnerships.

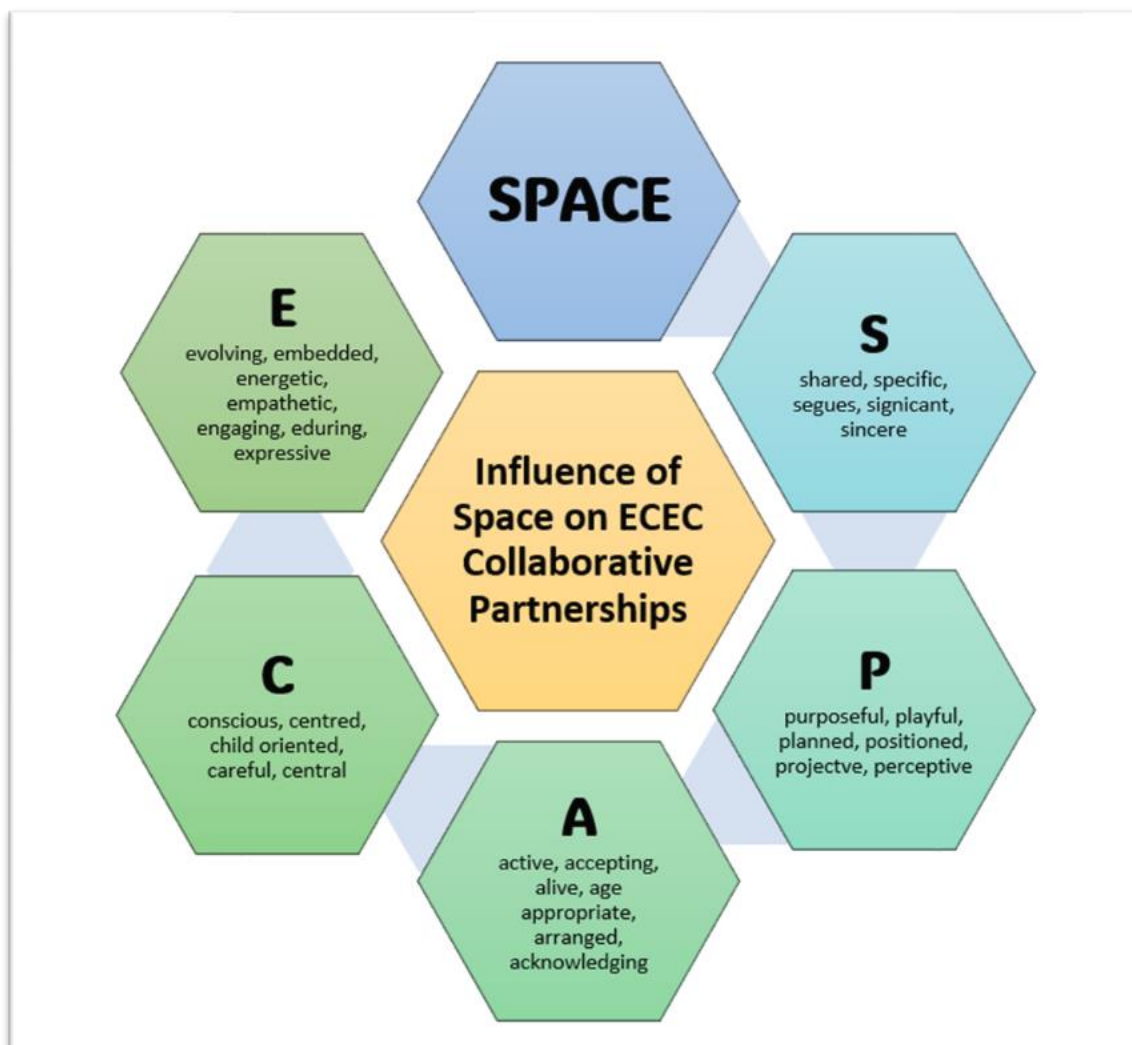
Observations confirmed that the influence of the space impacted on collaborative partnerships. More specifically, what emerged was the presence of particular components within the S-P-A-C-E that mediated and enhanced interactions and therefore collaborative partnerships:

¹ Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011 SI 653) - such as the requirement for 3.25sqm of unencumbered indoor space per child (Regulation 107), 7sqm per child outdoor (Regulation 108), administration space for consulting with families (Regulation 111), instruction on natural light and ventilation (Regulation 110), Fencing (Regulation 104), Bathrooms (Regulation 109), Nappy Change facilities (Regulation 112), Laundry (Regulation 106) and Sleep and Rest (Regulation 84).

- **S** Shared, specific, segues, significant and sincere.
- **P** Purposeful, playful, planned, positioned, projective, and perceptive.
- **A** Active, accepting, age appropriate, arranged and acknowledging.
- **C** Conscious, centred, child oriented, careful, and central.
- **E** Evolving, embedded, energetic, empathetic, engaging, enduring and expressive.

Figure 7.8

The Influence of Space on ECEC Collaborative Partnerships

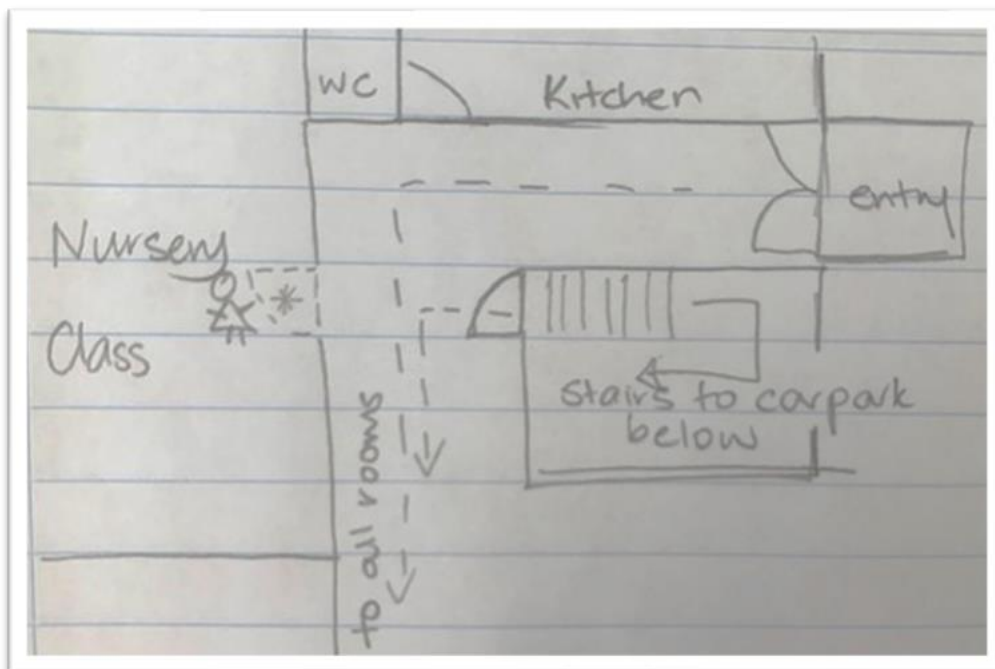


Examples of the way space influenced the collaborative partnerships are provided below.

Spaces for quality interactions that supported collaborative partnerships were observed as “spaces as segues” that facilitated the flow of these relationships. These segues were observed to be meeting places, or pivot points, where stakeholders engaged each other but also passed through, in terms of unintentional meeting places, such as hallways. For example, at Gumnut Childcare there is no foyer or office space on the classroom level (Figure 7.9).

Figure 7.9

Gumnut Childcare Entrance



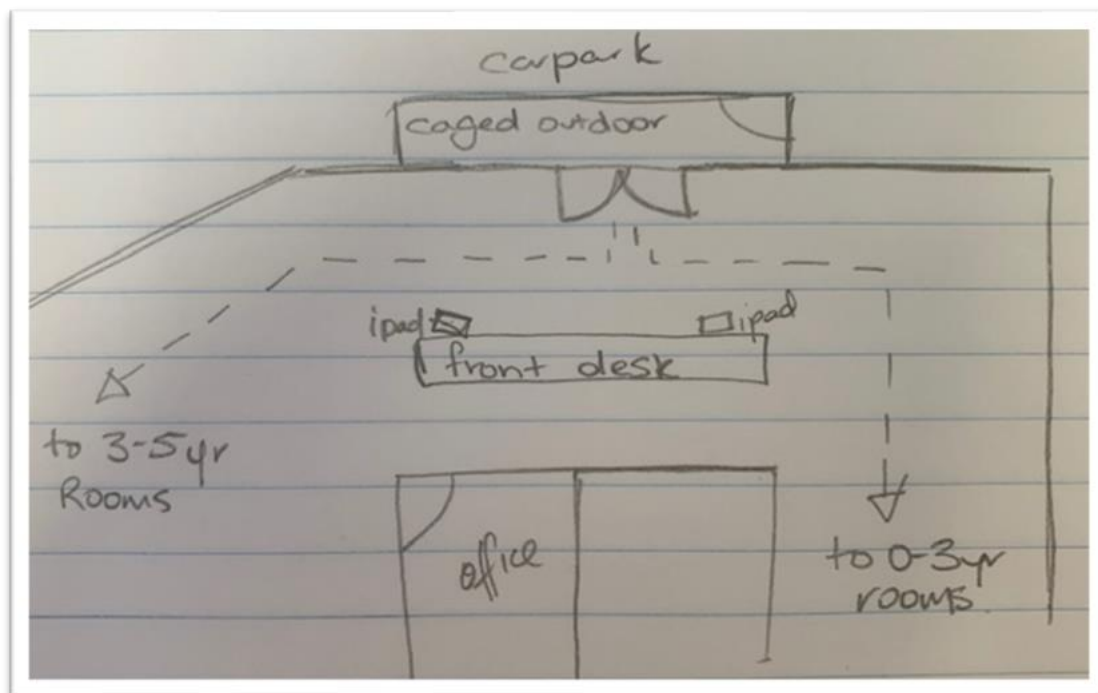
A hallway space is usually a transitional space, with its typical purpose to encourage a flow of people from one place to another. However closest to the entrance is a Dutch door (a half-height door otherwise referred to as a stable door) to the nursery. In this space, Educator Chelsea spent a significant portion of the morning and afternoon routine engaged with children, families, and educators from across the whole service as they came and went.

Alternatively, the front desk at Mountain Kids (Figure 7.10) appeared to float in the foyer. In the middle of the foyer was the front desk, not attached to walls or

hemmed in, enabling a flow of traffic to be in and around all sides of the desk. It was a space where educators and families (parents and children) were welcome and were observed continuously moving in and out of both sides of the desk as they engaged with each other. A floating desk acted as another example of spaces as segues. Families arrived, engaged, and moved through the space, however the valuable interactions in these spaces were seen to support high quality collaborative partnerships when ECPs facilitated through availability and engagement.

Figure 7.10

Mountain Kids Foyer



Providing another example, “spaces as active” reflects the busyness of ECEC settings. The second goal of this study was to observe and investigate the interactions between ECPs and families (within services rated Exceeding the NQS in QA6) to explore how these evidence and foster quality collaborative partnerships. Martha from Mountain Kids described “calming the chaos” as an important aspect that influenced how spaces were used to support collaborative partnerships. It was observed that active and busy spaces were positively harnessed, but with purpose

and intent. Figure 7.11 is an example of how Martha created spaces to draw stakeholders together, actively and engaged. As children arrived in this setting, they were invited towards a table of provocations that extended from their prior interests and learning. This example in Figure 7.11 connects to the reading of *Wombat Stew* (story by Marcia Vaughan).

Figure 7.11

Active Spaces



The children and families moved to a welcoming table and children began to draw their recipe for Wombat stew. As children began, educators and parents conversed, and care handed over to educators. Active spaces at Mountain Kids where children and adults were engaged, had an underlying focus on creating calm to provide positive experiences for children and families as they separated for the day. Active spaces were observed as being utilised particularly in transitional times, such as drop off, where educators and families could engage together, supporting the child in passing from parent to educator. These types of interactions, facilitated by the space, supported, and enhanced collaborative partnerships.

“Spaces as expressive” reflected the needs and interests of stakeholders. An intentionality of expressive spaces was demonstrated both in their design and use.

For example, initiatives by the ECEC service came alive, expressing their values, way of working and their philosophy as reflected in their mission and vision statement: “Our mission at *Indigo House* is to provide an inclusive, natural and sustainable environment that promotes respect, compassion, wellbeing and a love of learning in every child. *Indigo House* aims to be an authentic community in the [foundation] tradition”. Their philosophy (Figure 7.12) goes on to include the development of “trusting, respectful relationships with all members of the community so they feel a genuine sense of belonging”.

Figure 12

Indigo House Mission, Vision and Philosophy

Mission

Our Mission is to provide an inclusive, natural and sustainable environment that promotes respect, compassion, wellbeing and a love of learning in every child.

Vision

aims to be an authentic community in the Tradition that promotes excellence in learning through the Our vision is built around our desire to help educate and provide children with the foundations to become independent, confident and resilient young people in preparation for their journey ahead.

Philosophy

We aspire to be faithful to the while following the philosophy of an education for life—a learning process where children are encouraged to develop at their own pace in a safe and caring prepared environment. We focus on the values of respect, compassion and the fostering of wellbeing and confidence in every child, which supports their spiritual development. We develop trusting, respectful relationships with all members of the community so they feel a genuine sense of belonging. We aspire to excellence by being the best we can in everything we do for children, families, staff and the community.

At Indigo House a large community garden forms a welcoming part of their service playground (Figure 7.13) Spaces being expressive themselves reflect *how* stakeholders came together and for what purpose, enabling and fostering collaborative partnerships.

Figure 7.13

Expressive Spaces



A full deconstruction of each term in the *Influence of Space* is included in Appendix F The Influence of S-P-A-C-E, of this thesis. These components are not intended to be an exhaustive or mandatory list, rather, these components surfaced throughout observations.

The influence of space provided a significant insight into the facilitation of these high-quality interactions and in doing so, contributed to informing the second goal of this study which was to better understand interactions that fostered and enabled collaborative partnerships through observation. This insight extends on findings by Berti et al. (2019) who took into consideration stakeholder perceptions

and participation in child-centred approaches to space in ECEC. Their findings suggested some use of spaces reflected pedagogical views of educators. However, the influence of space identified in the current study extends this consideration to more broadly encapsulate how spaces influence interactions, particularly stakeholders' collaborative partnerships.

Furthermore, others such as Pairman and Dalli (2017) and Persson and Tallberg Broman (2017) utilised Lefebvre's spatial triad model (Lefebvre, 1974) to consider multiple perspectives of the use of space in ECEC. Using this same model Pipitone and Raghavan (2017) identified how spaced impacted experiences of mature students living abroad . In analysing the previous applications of Lefebvre's model it was noted the triad was applied in a variety of methods including qualitative observations and quantitative questionnaires. The influence of space insight of this study builds on these existing uses of Lefebvre's model, specific to collaborative partnerships. Bearing some similarities to Pairman and Dalli (2017) who considered through observation the influence of space on children and educators in and with the built environment, the current study focused on educator and family interactions. Observational goals of this study illuminated through the key insight, the influence of space, the way in which ECEC service spaces facilitated and enhanced collaborative partnerships between educators and families.

7.2.2. Responsive and Differentiated Connections

Responsive and differentiated connections were interactions observed as evidencing and fostering collaborative partnerships. Connections, defined as responsive were action-oriented responses that promptly and sensitively modified language, practice or spaces to the interest or need of another. Meanwhile, differentiated is determined to mean this responsiveness was an individualised or

uniquely inclusive adaptation that was specifically diversified for the receiver. Such responsive and differentiated connections were observed surfacing during drop off and pick up transitional times to evidence high-quality collaborative partnerships.

Educators and families in all three case sites demonstrated practices, through their actions and language, that was adaptive and diversified to enhance the outcomes of the interaction specific to each partnership. Observations realised the second goal of this study, the insights from which will now be further extrapolated.

Educators and family members were observed as having responsive and differentiated connections in each of the participant services. Evidence of responsive and differentiated connections were observed as enacted by stakeholders, each educator-family relationship being unique. For example, at Gumnut Childcare, educator Chelsea enacted the morning routine differently for a family who had been a part of the service formost of the year, compared to a new enrolment. Chelsea altered her practices and the way she spoke, to be more explicit, in response to guiding the new family through the drop off routine. She modelled for them the morning process. She spoke to the child and the parent detailing the steps as she actioned them with the family. The parent was also observed mimicking this language and reiterating the process for the child in her arms. This included supporting the child to wave when Chelsea said hello, to saying “lets follow Miss Chelsea and put away your shoes”.

Both stakeholders were active in their shared purpose, evidencing their collaborative partnership towards the same goal for the child. The essence of their practices, in action and language, was a powerful form of collaborative partnership interaction that evidenced the second goal of this study. Furthermore, after the parent had left, Chelsea discussed this interaction and her reasoning for the change

in practice with another staff member. Chelsea was not only modelling for the child and parent, but also for another educator in the space. Responsive and differentiated connection here was evidenced between long term families and newcomers, for both child and parent, and later reiterated for a less experienced educator.

Similarly, Silvia, an educator at Indigo House, offered a variety of welcoming strategies, both verbal and in practice, depending on the needs or skillset of the receiver (be it adult or child). Silvia was responsive to their needs and differentiated her language and practice to adapt for this. In interacting with Dina's two children, Silvia first smiled and waved from across the playground to acknowledge their arrival in the space. This was followed by a brief conversation with both children and parents where all adults in the space were modelling the routines, language, and expectations for drop off. Both stakeholders, educator and parent, verbalised and modelled their processes for the younger child, including reassuring the child that it was okay to feel upset when the parent left. It was observed however, that the intensity was lessened for the older child who was seemingly independent, assured and appeared secured in their routine and in their relationship with the educators. In this example, Silvia demonstrated responsive and differentiated connection between siblings, varying her language and practices to meet their needs. From this interaction, the parent could see Silvia's practice change for each child. Later in interviews reflecting on this observation, Dina articulated how this evidence of Silvia knowing her children individually increased their level of trust, enhancing the efforts to foster a collaborative partnership. Dina said " [educator] just knew exactly what he needed, which was different to another kid", contributing a key insight towards goal two.

Finally, at Mountain Kids, parent Naomi arrived with her son. Martha was hovering near the foyer for their arrival as the family recently welcomed a new baby and the older son had been unsettled. Greeting him at the door Martha leapt with excitement “[Name]! Did you see they brought a new orange digger onto the job site next door yesterday?” She reached her arms out and lifted him to see out the window. “Shall we tell Miss [educator]?... child nodded... “Quick give Mum and [baby] a kiss and let’s go find Miss [educator], is that okay Mum? Any messages?” Martha returned after having handing over the child and continuing the conversation about diggers into the classroom with other children and educators. She reassured the parent that her son was engaged, and that they [educators] completely understood the changes to their routine would impact his drop offs. The parent thanked Martha for changing up the usual practice and “intercepting” as needed. The responsive and differentiated connection between Martha, Naomi and her son was seen to positively impact the collaborative partnership. The parent left and Martha returned to the desk greeting every family in a different way. Some were simply hellos, some were stories recounted from the previous day, or “did you see that photo from [experience]”, to a cuddle as the child walked past towards their classroom. Martha demonstrated a deep knowledge of the needs and interests of the whole family unit when enacting responsive and differentiated connections.

Observations of stakeholder interactions during drop off and pick up routines led to the second goal insight, responsive and differentiated connections. This insight nuances findings of earlier studies by Fenech et al. (2019) whose spectrum of intentionality (p. 710) evidenced educators prediction of families’ needs as ranging from reactionary to proactive. The current study’s observations revealed that the educator’s prior knowledge and understanding of the family provided for responsive

and differentiated connections that evidenced forethought and planning. It is proposed that due to the current study's positioning in exceeding level services, this proactive approach resonated with their quality rating result. In exposing this insight from the second goal of the study, observations of responsive and differentiated connections were in part contrary to the Fenech et al. (2019) study. In the current study, neither the level of educator qualifications nor experiences were correlated with their engagement in high quality collaborative partnerships, rather stakeholders' capacity for responsive and differentiated connections were a testament to their successful interactions.

Observational techniques utilised to gather insights for this study provided for nuanced contributions to existing research by including how the family, not just educators, enacted responsive and differentiated connections as they too participated in the process of explicitly adapting practices or language to support children's transitions during morning and afternoon routines. This commitment by both stakeholders in a collaborative partnership builds on and supports research by



Researcher Memo

*As this Discussion Chapter moves to insights from the third goal of the study, it draws together the descriptions from interviews, the observations from site visits and the situational analysis mapping to culminate in an exploration of key components and inclusions of high-quality collaborative partnerships in ECEC. There is an indigenous word of the Pitjantjatjara people from Central Australia, **Kanyini**, that refers to the interconnection of all things, the people, environment, and relationships. The concept of Kanyini seems a fitting reflection of the interconnected nature of influences on ECEC Collaborative Partnerships.*

Kambouri et al. (2021) and Vuorinen (2020). The unity observed as educators and parents enacted these responsive and differentiated connections simultaneously, evidenced high quality collaborative partnerships.

7.3. Explorations of High-Quality Collaborative Partnerships

The third goal of the study was to explore the high-quality interactions ECPs and families evidenced within services rated as Exceeding the NQS in QA 6. To address this research goal a specific research question was developed: What are the key components and inclusions that reflect high quality practices in collaborative partnerships? Informing this third research question were the collective findings, as drawn from the culmination of all data collection methods and analysis, including stakeholder descriptions from semi structured interviews, observations from within each participant setting, and evidence gleaned from situational mapping. Key components and inclusions of high-quality partnerships build upon earlier insights of embedded and alive philosophies, remarkable relationships, the influence of space, and responsive and differentiated connections.

All three case sites of this study were rated Exceeding the NQS. It is of value to be cognisant that individual services with the same rating will be nuanced. Ratings are applied across 15 standards and consider three exceeding themes including embedded practices that are informed by critical reflection and shaped by meaning engagement with families and/or the community (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023). Whilst sharing the same overall rating, each service operates within their unique way of working moulded by numerous contextual influences explicit to their setting. Each case site's evidencing of their attainment of the 15 standards and exceeding themes will be achieved in different ways.

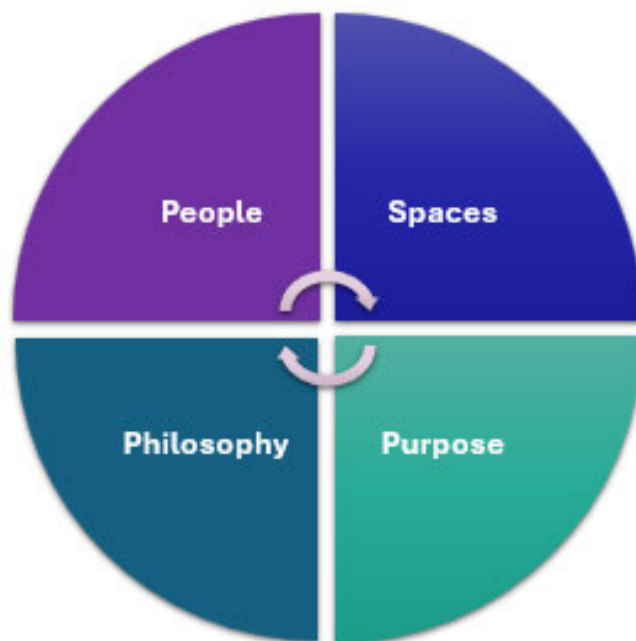
Nuanced by their discovery through stakeholder description and observations, this study's insights offer valuable considerations that build upon the existing list of components to collaborative partnership identified in the literature review (Chapter 2) and the first article (Chapter 3). Significantly, this study's cumulative exploration of high-quality collaborative partnerships, draws together details of components and inclusions and addresses the translation of these into mechanisms. The mechanisms are how components are actualised in practice. This discussion will now unpack in more detail the key components identified by this study's insights, and then illuminate the mechanisms by which they were enacted to positively impact high quality collaborative partnerships.

7.3.1. Key Components and Inclusions of High-Quality Collaborative Partnerships

Like threads of DNA that weave together, the findings from the first and second research questions, together with the simultaneous situational mapping process, culminated to inform the final goal of this study. Interpreted as key components and inclusions, high-quality collaborative partnerships were found to be facilitated and enhanced by a synergistic relationship between educators and families, the spaces in which their partnerships formed and developed, a strongly interwoven philosophy, and the capacity building nature of their interactions towards goals for the child. The key components and inclusions of high-quality collaborative partnerships culminate around four central tenets: the people, the spaces, the philosophy, and the purpose, as they emerged from the synthesis of the cumulative data collection and analysis (Figure 7.14).

Figure 7.14

Collaborative Partnership Central Tenets



The People.

ECPs and families in this study reinforced a synergy of shared commitment and willingness to actively engage as suggested by Hartman (2018); Kambouri et al. (2021); Vuorinen (2020), and akin to the conceptualisation of collaborative partnerships as stakeholders riding the tandem bicycle proposed by Mason et al. (2023). There was no evidence of a power struggle, nor one stakeholder being authoritative in positioning themselves as expert, and conversely, no one stakeholder was seen to acquiesce to another. The participants of this study detailed genuine collective intentions. For example, parent Naomi said, “we are all on the same page”, and parent Dina, “everyone's on the same page at the same time”. Meanwhile educators attributed the same like-mindedness and equilibrium with families to their connectedness stating “with our relationship with families, I think, ensuring that we are available, it's being in tune with every family, like what they're

doing in their personal world as much as what the children are doing in our world. It's maintaining that ongoing relationship and connection and conversation”.

This study's findings extend on discussions in existing literature by offering additional discoveries regarding the impact of qualifications, roles, and positions of power in educator-family collaborative partnerships research (Cutshaw et al., 2022; Fenech et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020). The synergy between participant educators and families in this study evidenced a genuine relationship that valued the contribution of each of the parent and ECP, as unique and valuable, but also imbalanced. Collaborative partnerships were seen to be strengthened by an imbalance, not perceived as an unequal contribution, but rather a capacity building opportunity for mutual learning. An example of this was provided by parent Dina when discussing children's transitions to older classrooms. She detailed how, at Indigo House this was a discussion between the service leaders, educators, and herself regarding the child's readiness. Further, she was provided with an understanding from educator's perspectives, and offered the overall holistic intention behind the decision making. Dina said:

“It's really good when we [family] see that structure, too. We're sent a whole picture of where everyone belongs- who's the deputy, who's the team leader, what role they play, so that's helpful. [Director] said, “look, we want to put her in that, but [educator] and I think it's the best place for her”. I said, “well, if you and [educator] think it's the best place for her, then I'll go with it”. But then to be able to just sit down with her [child] and show all the pictures of her new teachers, and for us as parents to know that [educator] will be the team leader- there's that reassurance around decision making”.

Operating within the participant services of this study were remarkable relationships between educators and families, identified as an insight earlier in Section 7.1.2. Provided through bi-directional interactions between stakeholders, these relationships were formulated through consistency, communication, availability, respect, and support. Participants also experienced a sense of safety and security, belonging, culture and community as a byproduct resulting from the development of trust through these antecedents. The situational (relational) mapping of data demonstrates the consistency with which this insight was found across all participants and case sites. Figure 7.15 provides a small segment of this map that be accessed in full via the web link in the note below.

Figure 7.15

Segment of Situation (Relational) Mapping of Antecedents to Trusting Relationships



Note: Full map available via this link <https://mm.tt/app/map/3258097410?t=hQ1iTyK6Us>

The Spaces.

The spaces in which collaborative partnerships were developed, evolved, and were maintained were seen to mediate and enhance interactions. Detailed earlier in Section 7.2.1 The influence of space, outlined the positive ways in which space was observed to influence collaborative partnerships. Mechanisms by which these were enacted required a consciousness and presence by participants. Active engagement of families and educators within the ECEC service was reflected in and by the spaces. It was further evidenced, particularly through the situational (relational) mapping with participants, that stakeholders had concurrent experiences of the same spaces while detailing varied, but not necessarily opposing, perspectives. Engagement in and with spaces was initiated by educators, for example the setting of purposeful and welcoming arrival spaces that drew in families and children, and by families, for example parents and grandparents supported children in adding to the “welcome wall” adorned with photos of generations of families who have attended the community ECEC setting. Both stakeholders share the common purpose and intent of outcomes for the child. This study’s poststructural underpinnings and overarching goal to harness stakeholder voices brought the influence of space insight further into focus.

Previous scholars investigations of space in ECEC have included Pairman and Dalli (2017) and Persson and Tallberg Broman (2017) who translated Lefebvre’s spatial triad of perceived space, conceived space and lived space into practices that operate simultaneously in ECEC settings. In practice, the simultaneous nature of space could be conceptualised as offering co-existing viewpoints and truths, harnessing complex relationships. Adding an additional layer to existing research was a socio-spatial perspective of experiential learning by Pipitone and Raghavan

(2017) who used Lefebvre's spatial triad to reveal the meaningful influence of space on participants engagement and experiences.

This research study extended on previous research findings and Lefebvre's spatial triad in reviewing pedagogical practices, nuancing the influence of space and the interactions that occur within ECEC setting. As participants engaged in spaces, meaning making opportunities were embedded in the social context through participatory approaches to collaborative partnerships. Resulting from this insight, in addition to the influence of space (Section 7.2.1 and Appendix F) this study also contributes to the field, an adaptation of Lefebvre's triad to include influence of space in the central social and learning space of the triad model, discussed later.

The Philosophy.

An alignment between the philosophy of the ECEC service, the educators and families that was embedded and alive in everyday practice fostered collaborative partnerships. Detailed in Section 7.1.1, embedded and alive philosophies were evidenced by stakeholder in their language, through their action, and their use of spaces. Mechanisms by which these components were enacted were evidenced as facilitating open lines of communication between stakeholders, supporting the other person in their role with the child, and creating purposeful spaces centred around outcomes for the child. ALL participants in the study no matter what their role, educator or family, had a shared focus on providing outcomes for the child and so chose to engage with mechanisms that they believed would best surface those outcomes. The active nature of the philosophy's presence in these ways, was evidenced as means by which educators and families found alignment in working together, facilitating, and enhancing their efforts to collaboratively partner. Hence,

open lines of communication facilitated the multiple truths of various stakeholders towards the attainment of a shared goal.

The Purpose.

United by a shared journey towards outcomes for the child, educators and families of the study experienced responsive and differentiated connections that were individualised and augmented by one or both stakeholders in a fluid relationship. Creating a central focus around outcomes for the child, the harnessing of each stakeholder's unique knowledge of the child afforded for a multi-perspective view that added depth and purpose to shared intentions to collaborate. The mechanisms by which responsive and differentiated connections were made were facilitated through consistency, communication, availability, respect and support, that were established as antecedents to trust. Engaging in a trusting manner, facilitated stakeholders' ability to work together for the purpose of attaining outcomes for child. Stakeholders evidenced "knowing" each other, and a willingness to work together with cultural humility, increasing each other's skills and expertise as a biproduct of the collaborative partnership.

Exposed in the literature review in Chapter 2, many models exist for family engagement, involvement, participation, and collaboration. The key components and inclusions to collaborative partnerships brought to light through this study build on the knowledge these existing models offer. Insights from this study demonstrated the mechanism by which collaborative partnerships were enacted and provide refined understandings of the positioning and perspectives of educators and families.

7.4. Layers and Sequencing of Components and Inclusions

In contemplating the key components and inclusions of collaborative partnerships that emerged from the collective data and findings of this study, an

unanticipated insight surfaced. Nuanced findings of this current research suggested that the success of collaborative partnerships may require some components and inclusions to precede, supervene, or build upon others sequentially. Ruminating over the concern that led to this study, a lack of clarity around collaborative partnerships actualisation in practice, the researcher considered the mechanisms by which the identified key components and inclusions were enacted. During the participatory situational (relational) mapping in the second interviews, educator and parent participants undertook a process of connecting elements (themes and components) and memoing their relationship. Throughout the mapping while participants were physically highlighting components or grouping them in themes, the transcriptions of audio taken during the process were filled with comments like, "...comes first", "builds on", or "without that you can't have...", "which in turn results in...". For example, while working on her relational map, Naomi said "the communication, I guess, builds that trust". Coming through the data strongly and consistently was this sequential or layered consideration of collaborative partnership components occurring in an order.

Reinforcing this notion, Dina, parent at Indigo House, discussed as she mapped the connection between respect and trust, saying "which at the end, I think, it just builds trust, which just makes it [collaborative partnership] all happen". Higher order thinking evidenced by participants exposed findings and insights from this study that have alluded to a sequencing of components that provided for a flow, or pathway, towards the attainment of collaborative partnerships in practice. This study provides insights into the mechanisms by which components of collaborative partnerships are enacted. Such insights were further extended by these

unanticipated findings. The sequential nature of components and inclusions are suggested to have an influence on the success of collaborative partnerships.

As previously evidenced in the remarkable relationship's insights of the first goal (Section 7.1.2), the antecedents of consistency, communication, availability, respect and support, were identified as "precursors" to the component of trust in high quality collaborative partnerships. Likewise, the responsive and differentiated connections between stakeholders (Section 7.2.2) were not possible without an understanding of, and respect for, the knowledge and expertise of the other stakeholder in remarkable relationships (Section 7.1.2). In this study, it was evidenced that the capacity building and mutual learning facilitated in remarkable relationships was built upon to enable individualised and adaptive interactions that became part of the culture building process.

Using participatory situational (relational) mapping drew out deep connections in the data. Stakeholders were able to articulate their experiences and perspectives, prompted by their reflections of the interactions observed from the researcher. In considering the layers and sequencing of collaborative partnership components, the mapping provided stakeholders a way to illuminate priority components, interconnected components or those that were dependent on others. Similarly to data from Naomi's mapping where she stated, "the communication, I guess, builds that trust", during Martha's mapping she also explained,

"I think all of these - so trust – that's interconnected. So being available, having the communication - which are the conversations - is showing that's embedded. So, consistency, which builds trust and belonging.... I think positive relationships encompass all of that. So, I'd circle positive relationships as an over capturing every aspect there".

The third goal of this study explored interactions that evidenced the key components and inclusions of high-quality collaborative partnerships through stakeholder observations, interviews, and SA mapping. Insights gained from interactions during collaborative mapping with participants led to deeper understandings of factors that facilitate and enhance collaborative partnership, and how these are enacted successfully in practice.

CHAPTER 8: PAPER 4 – “Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings”.

8.1. Introduction

Prepared for publication and submitted for review by Early Childhood Education Journal, this article *Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings* shares findings and insights of the current study’s exploration of educator and family experiences and perspectives of high-quality collaborative partnership. The paper offers details of key components and inclusions to collaborative partnerships, and insight into the mechanisms by which such components are translated into practice in exceeding rated ECEC services.

8.2. Published Paper (under review)

Early Childhood Education Journal
Mechanism of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings
--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Mechanism of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings
Article Type:	Original Research
Keywords:	collaborative partnerships; Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); family-educator relationships
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Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Funding Information:	
Abstract:	Collaborative partnerships between stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings are recognised to contribute to positive outcomes for children and improve service quality. However, for many within the field, interpretation and actualisation of the components that make up collaborative partnerships remain an enigma. The concern is that without clear interpretation of key components and inclusions, educators and families struggle to enact and engage in high-quality collaborative partnerships. This paper shares insights from a major research project that explored ECEC stakeholder perspectives and experiences of successful collaborative partnerships. By exposing the key components and inclusions from three exceeding-level ECEC services, this paper offers clarity for educators and families to increase the efficacy for translating mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in everyday practice in ECEC.

Title Page

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Article title

Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings

Abstract

Collaborative partnerships between stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings are recognised to contribute to positive outcomes for children and improve service quality. However, for many within the field, interpretation and actualisation of the components that make up collaborative partnerships remain an enigma. The concern is that without clear interpretation of key components and inclusions, educators and families struggle to enact and engage in high-quality collaborative partnerships. This paper shares insights from a major research project that explored ECEC stakeholder perspectives and experiences of successful collaborative partnerships. By exposing the key components and inclusions from three *exceeding-level* ECEC services, this paper offers clarity for educators and families to increase the efficacy for translating mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in everyday practice in ECEC.

Keywords: collaborative partnerships; Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); family-educator relationships

Credit Statements

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Declarations:

There was no funding associated with this research project. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of University of Southern Queensland. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee (01/07/2021 and No. H21REA115). Informed voluntary consent was obtained from all participants.

Introduction

International policies and frameworks position family engagement in services, and connections with educators as a priority in ECEC (OECD, 2021). Collaborative partnerships are recognised as contributing to positive outcomes for children (Hartman, 2018; Murphy et al., 2021) and improved service quality (Boyd & Garvis, 2021). This includes the recognition of families as children's first educators, holders of expert knowledge of the child, and as the child's advocate (Barblett et al., 2021). Successful interactions between families and educators in ECEC services has implications on quality (Cutshaw et al., 2022), with literature reinforcing the value and importance of successful collaborative partnerships (Akhtar et al., 2019; Bordogna, 2020; Vuorinen, 2020), and a range of models offer a conceptual interpretation of these interactions (Kambouri et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2021).

Yet, the complexities of the parent-educator relationships (Cottle & Alexander, 2014), and an existing lack of clarity in interpreting the components of these collaborative partnerships, is currently contributing to limited actualisation of these practices in ECEC (Gross et al., 2019; Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Globally, the wrap-around frameworks of legislation, standards, practices, and curriculums reinforce expectations for, and on, families and educators in collaborative partnerships. For example, in Australia, a deconstruction of such documents under the National Quality Framework (NQF) by various authors including Hadley and Rouse (2018); Rouse and O'Brien (2017); Siraj et al. (2019), surmised that the impact of the indistinct language within the NQF poses a barrier to both the effective interpretation, and by association the effective implementation of collaborative partnerships.

This type of finding is concerning, particularly given the integral nature of collaborative partnerships. Educators and families are struggling to implement successful high quality collaborative partnerships, inhibited by a dearth of translation from policy to practice. An example is a recent review of the assessment and rating results of Australia's ECEC services in the first quarter of 2021 where only 35% of the sector exceeded the national standard for collaborative partnerships with families and community. It is proposed that lack of clear interpretation of the key components of collaborative partnerships, and the mechanisms by which to enact them contribute to these results (Authors, 2023) (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017).

Motivated by these concerns, and the challenges educators and families face in interpreting and enacting successful collaborative partnerships, Author One sought to explore this further, undertaking a major research project as part of her Doctorate. This paper shares insights from that study focussed particularly on the mechanisms by which collaborative partnerships were actualised in practice successfully within exceeding rated services. First, the paper addresses a review of the literature related to the conceptualisation of collaborative partnerships, and their components, as well as the positioning of families and educators in relation to these. This is followed by outlining the methodological details of the study. Finally, the authors discuss key insights from the experience and perspective of stakeholders in successful collaborative partnerships. The paper concludes by offering

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implications and applications as to the value of an increased awareness of the key components and inclusions in providing clarity for educators and families in more effectively translating these findings into everyday practices as a mechanism by which to engage in high quality collaborative partnerships in ECEC.

Literature review

Collaborative partnerships are understood as the coming together of stakeholders who together work towards a common goal. Within a shifting global landscape of family dynamics, work/life balance, and educational agendas, there has also been a change in the purpose and provision of ECEC (Fenech et al., 2019). In these settings, educators and families engage in collaborative partnerships as extensions of the child's microenvironments (Vlasov & Hujala, 2017) where a strong alignment and mutuality promotes positive outcomes for the child (Murphy et al., 2021; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017). The significance of such collaborative partnerships are echoed throughout international policy and curriculum for ECEC (OECD, 2021). The implication of changes to models of service delivery flows on to influence the roles and responsibilities of educators and families, and the way in which they interact and collaborate. Ensuring alignment and harmony between educators and family's expectations in working together can be supported through an understanding a number of key components and inclusions to collaborative partnerships.

A plethora of family engagement, involvement, participation, and collaboration models exist in current literature. More specifically, those models with an early childhood focus include Rouse (2012) model of family centred practice, Rouse and O'Brien (2017) Parent-Teacher Partnerships model, and Kambouri et al. (2021) CAFÉ model. Collectively, these models' forefront the empowerment of stakeholders in jointly and actively contributing to collaborative partnerships through supportive and respectful relationships. Others, such as authors *Authors (2023)* explored international collaborative partnership research and models in ECEC and offered a metaphor for educator-family collaborative partnerships as the riding of a tandem bicycle. Highlighting the positive contributions of existing collaborative partnership models as exposing the parts of the bicycle, and the instructions by which to build it (the components listed in Table 1 below) and provoked considerations regarding gap in the literature, the mechanisms of how to ride the tandem bicycle.

Table 1 captures key literature associated with collaborative partnership models and their essential components, developed from a detailed view of existing research and reports undertaken by Author One as part of her doctoral project. The review of literature helped surface key components of collaborative partnerships that resonated through existing research, including the need for communication, respect, and overwhelmingly across the literature, trust as an essential between stakeholders. An exploration of the components provided in Table 1 illuminated the need for deeper understanding of their actualisation in practice. In their publication, *Authors (2023)* noted that what they surfaced as missing in the literature was an appreciation for the complexities of the educator-family collaborative partnership and an exposure of *how* they achieved success. They reinforced that further research that helped expose the mechanisms of actioning the key components and inclusions

of high-quality partnerships would serve to support their effective enactment in practice. This clarity would in turn support educators and families in translating the components into quality practice towards successful and high-quality collaborative partnerships.

Table 1

Components of collaborative partnerships in existing research

Component	Literature by
A commitment by both parties, family, and educator, to actively and consistently engage in the collaborative partnership	Kambouri et al. (2021); Vuorinen (2020)
Where willingness is matched with the availability of their time	Dunlap and Fox (2007); Vuorinen (2020)
Respect	Douglass and Klerman (2012); Dunlap and Fox (2007); Laletas et al. (2018)
Communication	Beaumont-Bates (2017); Coelho et al. (2018); Kambouri et al. (2021)
Safe and conducive environment in which to collaborate	Kambouri et al. (2021)
Trust	Beaumont-Bates (2017); Cottle and Alexander (2014); Douglass and Klerman (2012); Dunlap and Fox (2007); Gross et al. (2019); (MacNaughton, 2011); Phillipson (2017); (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017); Vuorinen (2020)
Empowerment	Laletas et al. (2017); Rouse (2012)
Shared purpose, goals and decision making.	Beaumont-Bates (2017); Cottle and Alexander (2014); Laletas et al. (2018); Rouse and O'Brien (2017)
A balance of power	Vuorinen (2020),
Reciprocity	MacNaughton (2011); Phillipson (2017); Rouse and O'Brien (2017)
The absence of rivalry bringing together stakeholder's expert knowledge of the child without the need to be authoritarian	Beaumont-Bates (2017) Dunlap and Fox (2007); Owen et al. (2000)
Moving beyond the rhetoric of information sharing in help seeker and help giver roles.	Dunst et al. (2019); Hadley and Rouse (2018)
The recognition of the unique contribution of each stakeholder, and sensitivity to their individual perspective that gives greater strength to the outcomes of the relationship	Beaumont-Bates (2017).
Limiting preconceived notions of 'others', assumptions and bias that would otherwise hinder attempts at collaborative partnerships	Vuorinen (2020).

1 As collaborative partnerships are evidenced to have the capacity to positively impact
2 outcomes for children, relationships with families and service quality, it is essential that their
3 enactment be better understood. A number of authors have offered a rationale for further research
4 focused on this topic, including Almendingen et al. (2021); Vuorinen (2020) who called for
5 observational studies to consider partnership A number of authors including Almendingen et al.
6 (2021); Vuorinen (2020) called for observational studies to consider partnership practices in action,
7 with particular emphasis on the limited moments of time for educators and families to collaborate at
8 drop off and pick up times (Coelho et al., 2018). Elevating the voice of each stakeholders lived
9 experience for themselves was also an important call out by the research field (Kambouri et al., 2021;
10 Sheridan et al., 2019; Vuorinen, 2020). However, a detailed exploration of e core components of
11 collaborative partnerships is worthy focus for future research. These types of insights offering a
12 deeper understanding of how these are developed and actualised in practice (Cutshaw et al., 2022;
13 Sheridan et al., 2019; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017; Wolf, 2020)

20 **The current study**

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22 Motivated by the concern, Author One sought to investigate *stakeholder descriptions of their*
23 *experiences of collaborative partnerships, observe collaborative partnership interactions, and explore*
24 *the key components and inclusions of these collaborative (Doctoral research project- Ethics number*
25 *No. H21REA115). The study was conducted with three services in Southeast Queensland, Australia,*
26 *that were rated Exceeding against Australia's National Quality Standard benchmark in their program*
27 *and practice (ACECQA, 2021). This approach was motivated by the strengths-based lens of Author*
28 *One who recognised the capabilities of stakeholders in those services that evidenced high quality*
29 *collaborative partnerships with families and communities,*

35 **Methodology**

36
37 A qualitative design was employed to guide the researcher's investigation through a
38 poststructural case study. The agnostic versatility of case study afforded for deep exploration of
39 multiple social investigations and world views and a consideration of how these influenced the
40 phenomenon of collaborative partnerships. Uncovering multiple experiences of participants, the
41 poststructural tenants of multiple truths from diverse perspectives could be captured in this approach.
42 Importantly the philosophical orientations of the researcher aligned with this poststructural paradigm
43 to reinforce research design decisions, including the use of semi-structured interviews, observations,
44 and situational analysis in a simultaneous data collection and analysis method.

50 **Sample and participants**

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52 The opportunity to participate in the study was offered to all Queensland services rated
53 Exceeding the NQS in quality area 1 and quality area 6. Of the 308 services meeting this qualifier,
54 three services in southeast Queensland participated. Within these services, non-random and
55 purposeful samples were chosen in selecting one educator (via convenience sampling) and one
56 parent (via purposive sampling) from the three ECEC services selected. Voluntary consent to
57 participate was gained from all participants, resulting in a total of three early childhood educators and
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three family members being involved in the study Gumnut Childcare, Indigo House and Mountain Kids ECEC services (Table 2).

Table 2

Participant details

Site	Parent	Educator
Gumnut Childcare*	Surish*	Chelsea*
	Parent to one child who attends the Nursery classroom	Diploma Qualified educator of 33 years, Nursery Educator & 2IC
Indigo House*	Dina*	
	Parent to two children, one completed care at Indigo House and now at school, the other remains at the service in the Toddler class	Silvia* Diploma Qualified educator of 5 years, Toddler Educator
Mountain Kids*	Naomi*	Martha*
	Parent to two children, one Pre-Kindy age and a newborn at home	Bachelor Qualified with 20 years' experience, Director & EDL

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity of participants

It was from these three services, and six participants that data for the study was drawn.

Data collection

Multiple data collection methods were utilised in this study, affording for a comprehensive and diverse collection of data related to the phenomenon. Observations were taken of participants during their typical drop off and pick up routines within their ECEC setting across a one-week period. These engagements occurred across a variety of settings including indoor and outdoor play spaces, ECEC service reception areas, and hallways. Observations were recorded using a Situated Evidence Tool (SET) developed by Author One to support the gathering of key information that encompassed the *whole research situation* influencing collaborative partnerships. This included, for example, not just interactions and spoken word, but the environment and objects in the space as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Situated Evidence Tool (SET)

Situated Evidence Tool (SET)				
Activities are goal-directed sets of actions—paths to accomplish. What are the modes people work in, and the specific activities and processes they go through?	Environments include the entire arena where activities take place. What is the character and function of the space overall, of each individual's spaces, and of shared spaces?	Interactions are between a person and someone or something else; they are the building blocks of activities. What is the nature of routine and special interactions between people, between people and objects in their environment, and across distances?	Objects are building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or unintended uses (thus changing their function, meaning and context). What are the objects and devices people have in their environments and how do they relate to their activities?	Users are the people whose behaviors, preferences, and needs are being observed. Who is there? What are their roles and relationships? What are their values and prejudices?
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role		
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2	Collaborative Partnerships	Collaborative partnerships enhance childrens inclusion, learning and wellbeing		
6.2.1	Transitions	Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.2	Access and participation	Effective partnership supports childrens access, inclusion and participation in the program.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.3	Community engagement	The service builds relationships and engages with its community.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
What are people doing? What actions and behaviors are people taking to reach goals?	How are they using env? What role does environ play? What is the overall setting in which the activities are taking place? How are people	Do you see routines? Interactions between People and objects - What are the basic interactions occurring for people to reach goals? What effect do people have on activities and environment?	What is used and what is not? Describe engagement with object - Are there obstacles? What are all the details that form the environment? How do objects relate to people, activities and interactions?	Who? What are their roles? How defined? Who are the people being observed? What are their personalities like? How do they engage with other people to reach goals?

Note: Situated Evidence Tool (SET) developed by Author One, 2022. Adapted from *AEIOU Observation Framework* by Hanington and Martin, 2012, Quarto Publishing Group (<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.usq.edu.au/lib/USQ/detail.action?docID=3399583>) and *National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument*, by ACECQA, 2020 (https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/NQS_AssessmentRatingInstrument.pdf). Copyright 2024 by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, twice with each participant. Having two interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to confirm interpretation and meaning by way of member checking, and a further opportunity to deep dive with participants into aspects of their first interview to draw out understanding and connections in the interview data. These interviews were conducted at the ECEC service at a time convenience to participants. Data further informed situational analysis methods occurring simultaneously. Situational Analysis (SA) (Clarke, 2003) mapping was informed by observations and interviews. There are three types on map in SA, being situational map (messy, relational, and ordered), social world/arena maps, and positional maps. In a novel approach to the use of situational analysis, during the second interview the researcher and participants collaboratively completed a situational (relational) map. The use of SA acted to enhance the trustworthiness of the study by way of member checking information from the first interview. Furthermore, the discussions from during the second interview and mapping process were recorded and transcribed as data, in addition to the product of the map being an artifact informing the findings of this study. The additional SA maps were completed by the researcher, informed by the collective data collection methods (Author One, 2023).

Data analysis

Due to the poststructural research design of this study, much of the data analysis was concurrent, rather than sequential. This approach harnessed the complexities of gathering multiple perspectives, experiences, interactions, and components of a phenomenon such as collaborative partnerships. MAXQDA 2022 Plus and MaxMaps software were utilised for coding and connecting themes in observation and interview data. Purposefully selected, this program was chosen for its capabilities in visualisation of data and mapping tools.

Observational analysis was guided by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) three phases of data reduction, display, interpretation, and verification. Reaffirming the poststructural research design alignment to methodological decision-making, the relationship between the researcher and their data was illuminated in the tacit learnings from observations, that would not otherwise have been brought to light by other methods. Interviews were transcribed by external contracts and open then axial coded in MAXQDA. Not only did this serve as a data source in its own right, but further informed the mapping process. Multiple and simultaneous truths of participants experiences of collaborative partnerships were laid out in SA maps. As a cartographic and iterative process, researcher's using SA work and rework their data to tease out connections and relationships. Each type of map informed understandings of stakeholders, and of collaborative partnerships in ECEC. While too complex to include in detail in this discussion, the collective insights from the SA maps informed the findings presented here.

Findings and discussion

Discussion will now focus on key insights that emerged from the data specifically related to mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in EC settings. A focus of the study was to surface *the key components and inclusions that reflected high quality collaborative partnerships*. Multiple data sources afforded for several insights that brought to light how high-quality collaborative partnerships were facilitated through four central themes: the influence of space; remarkable relationships; embedded and alive philosophies; and responsive and differentiated connections. These will now be extrapolated in more detail to provide stakeholders with clarity for their actualisation in practice.

The influence of space

Spaces in ECEC, defined as a combination of physical, geographic, and social constructions that occurred across a variety of settings, places, and environments, were found to be powerful devices that mediated and enhanced collaborative partnership interactions. The diverse spaces, which included indoor and outdoor play spaces, foyers and hallways, facilitated the development, evolution, and maintenance of high-quality collaborative partnerships. An unobtrusive but noteworthy interjection in the relationships between stakeholders (e.g., families and educators), the influence of space was seen to impacted collaborative partnerships.

Findings indicated that spaces influenced the manner in which participants engaged in collaborative partnerships. Early childhood professionals and families described spaces in their ECEC service as facilitating interactions and engagements, positively impacting relationships. Parent at Indigo House, Dina said *"They [Centre Director] are out in the foyer... all the time. Just there, ready to be... and he [child] just feels like they know him"*. Educators also identified the purposeful impact of spaces on collaborative partnerships as supporting meaningful connections. Martha from Mountain Kids said *"enabl[ing] the families to have ownership over their space and feel that sense of belonging in bringing their children here"*.

Endorsing space as having an impact on children's learning has a long been reflected in historical approaches to early childhood by seminal practitioners such as Malaguzzi and Montessori (Ailwood et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2011). More recently Pairman and Dalli (2017) considered the relationship between physical space and social interactions in ECEC, with respect to teacher to child interactions, children's peer to peer interactions and agency. In relation to collaborative partnerships between educators and families, Persson and Tallberg Broman (2017) used sociologist Lefebvre's spatial triad (Lefebvre, 1974) to consider parental involvement in ECEC in Sweden in a historically comparative method. Their study illuminated the shifting dynamic of ECEC delivery and the subsequent bearing this had on roles, responsibilities of, and interactions between, educators and families. Also using Lefebvre's triad, but unrelated to ECEC, was an investigation by Pipitone and Raghaven (2017) who's work offered a socio-spatial understanding of how engagements shape, and were shaped by, spaces. Insights from the current study extend upon these existing considerations of space. The current study offered an adaptation to Lefebvre's spatial triad, providing that *the influence of space*, operated in the central and social learning space of the triad. Furthermore, Author One's study found space to have significant impact on collaborative partnerships. Spaces acted as a mechanism by which collaborative partnership interactions were mediated and enhanced between stakeholders.

Remarkable relationships

A key insight, referred to as Remarkable Relationships, revealed components and inclusions of collaborative partnerships pertaining to a number of mechanisms within the educator-family relationships. Findings of the study illuminated a synergistic approach by stakeholders towards outcomes for the child. Enhanced by harnessing a multi-perspective view, educators and families contributed their individual and differing knowledge and experiences of the child to a melting pot of information that wove together to produce mutual learning and capacity building opportunities for each stakeholder.

An embracing of others' beliefs and world views, and acknowledgement of one's own positioning contributed a cultural humility that supported the success of collaborative partnerships. Activating reflexive relationships, the skillful listening by participants further supported collaborative partnerships (Burkardt & Thomas, 2022; Hartman, 2018). In their experience of remarkable relationships, parent Dina explained feeling heard by educators *"it's that respect in supporting the*

1 *family unit and the decisions of the family*". Likewise, Martha, a centre Director acknowledged *there's*
2 *a lot of aspects where we're building those connections and negotiating between the home and the*
3 *centre*". She continued saying " *...it's not an easy thing to develop that trust or that connection*".
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5 Trust was identified throughout ECEC and broader collaborative partnerships research as an
6 essential component and significant determining factor in the success of collaborative partnerships.
7 Interestingly, there is currently a paucity of literature exists in offering the mechanisms by which to
8 attain this trust. However, antecedents to trusting relationships, including consistency, communication,
9 availability, respect, and support emerged as findings from this study. The conceptualisation of these
10 elements being termed *antecedents* was conceived from a description by Chelsea who explained
11 "*that sense of trust comes from those things as like a layer underneath creating that [trust]*".
12 Antecedents therefore articulated stakeholders' consideration of factors that preceded and
13 cumulatively developed to afford for trust in collaborative partnerships. It was evidenced in the study
14 that the enactment of these antecedents, in a bidirectional manner between educator and family had
15 a twofold impact in breaking down barriers and building up stakeholder capacity.
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23 A compelling finding from this study, that differs to previous research, was that neither
24 qualifications nor experience of educators were an indicator of intentionality or capacity to
25 collaborative with families. Rather, it was proposed that educator's enactment of their service
26 philosophy, and depth of connection with families was more influential than qualifications or years of
27 experience. The harnessing of remarkable relationships shifted the narrative away of expert or
28 authoritarian roles in collaborative partnerships, towards a synergistic approach proposed by *Authors*
29 *(2023)* that leveraged power imbalances in a positive light, disrupting existing deficit-oriented rhetoric.
30 Offering mechanisms by which to actualise collaborative partnerships in practice, the elements of
31 remarkable relationships and antecedents to trust translate scholarly findings from Author One's
32 research project into tangible applications in the field. Educators and families who engage
33 consistently, communicating, being available and operating with respect and support for the other
34 develop trusting relationships towards the attainment of successful collaborative partnerships.
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42 ***Embedded and alive philosophies***

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44 Data was collected through observation, interview, and situational analysis at the three
45 participant ECEC services rated exceeding NQS, revealed exceptional levels of engagement with
46 service philosophies by all stakeholders. The enactment of these philosophies was deemed to be
47 embedded (consistent and interwoven) and alive (active) in three ways. Philosophies were embedded
48 and alive in the language of stakeholders, in their actions, and in the design and use of spaces with
49 the ECEC setting. An authenticity was evidenced in the alignment of the service philosophy with
50 educators and families alike. Articulated in their descriptions, stakeholders explained their
51 experiences of collaborative partnerships using the language of the service philosophy. For example,
52 a parent, Naomi detailed a "sense of belonging and culture" in the service. Emerging in their actions,
53 the service philosophy was seen to be embedded and alive during collaborative partnership efforts
54 during transition times. Drop off routines centred around intentions to provide consistency in practice.
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Naomi continued to explain *"the girls at the front desk provide that and then you walk through [to the classrooms] and it's provided again"*, with Martha the centre Director commenting in her interview *"being in tune with every family... It's maintaining that ongoing relationship and connection and conversation... Having a deep understanding and respect for the knowledge each stakeholder has of the child when sharing information"*. Genuine engagement between stakeholders, and of stakeholders with the philosophy was evidenced in these case sites.

Participant's descriptions and use of spaces in the ECEC service demonstrated how these facilitated embedded and alive philosophies, and in turn collaborative partnerships. From the philosophy of a Montessori service, an orderly arrangement was determined to provide children with a predictable indoor and outdoor environment, considered to support their self-regulation. Educator, Silvia, *"when the child has an orderly environment then they will feel that internal order... having that consistency and feeling safe in the environment will help them to regulate their emotions..."*. Notably the cohesiveness and shared values centred around the philosophy provided stakeholders with a strong foundational common ground on which to build their collaborative partnership. The prominence of embedded and alive philosophies was seen and heard in observations of collaborative partnerships in practice, as well as in the descriptions of stakeholder's experiences. Providing a mechanism through which educators and families could develop their collaborative partnerships, embedded and alive philosophies actualised their alignment with the service philosophy. Practices that brought the philosophy to life in language, in action and in spaces evidenced the transfer of policy into practice in a meaningful and tangible way for all stakeholders.

Responsive and differentiated connections

Action oriented and adaptive connections were realised as insights from the study as being responsive and differentiated. Observed as evidencing and fostering collaborative partnerships were the actions and language of stakeholders during drop off and pick up routines. These purposeful modifications to interactions, specific to each partnership, were seen to enhance the outcomes of each interaction. Modelling of processes and mimicking of language was evidenced by both parents and educators as they worked together to support children during transitional times and routines. In this shared purpose educators and families were seen to modify their language and action in a powerful practice that supported the development of, or facilitated the continuation of, their collaborative partnership. Later during interviews, stakeholders reflected on these interactions, articulating how the three-way interaction between educator, parent, and child in these periods of hand over at drop off or pick up increased levels of trust and enhanced the strength of collaborative partnerships. Educators demonstrated their depth of knowledge of the child and family in these interactions, while the family acknowledged the skills and abilities of the educator's role. A fluid and reflexive relationship was evidenced in these responsive and differentiated connections. The modelling of practices and mimicking of language were the mechanism by which responsive and differentiated connections were actualised in practice, successfully supporting the development and maintenance of collaborative partnerships in the process.

Delimitation, limitations, and future considerations

Sample size was an imposed restriction in this study. Firstly, there was a delimitation in the number of Queensland ECEC services rated Exceeding the NQS in quality area 1 and quality area 6. Secondly, the availability and willingness of people from that group proved to be a limitation as few chose to engage in the study, resulting in a significantly narrow number of participants. Research suggests there is no clear answer to sample size Vasileiou et al. (2018) and Sandelowski (1995) advised that qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to ensure the revealing of a “new and richly textured understanding” of the phenomenon under study, while small enough to allow the “deep, case-oriented analysis” (p. 183) of the data. Given that the sample size is small, generalisability is not assumed.

It is acknowledged that the method is a limitation because the observational and situational analysis mapping would be difficult to replicate. As part of the researcher maintained a journal and employed critical reflection and positioning process throughout the study as a way of deliberately noting some of the resulting interplay of elements (Newbury, 2001) and mitigating or minimising researcher bias.

For future similar research, researchers could consider broadening the participant sample and to be inclusive of children and people from management roles within ECEC services, as these stakeholders also have continued and diverse influences on the setting and collaborative partnership interactions. Future research considerations should include a practice guide for educators and families. Opportunity exists to build upon the findings of study's like this one, and others such as Kambouri et al. (2021), Murphy et al. (2021) and *Authors (2023)* to translate understanding of collaborative partnership components into explicit step by step mechanisms on a pathway towards the attainment of high collaborative partnerships for educators and families.

Implications and applications

Previous literature by Hadley and Rouse (2018); Rouse and O'Brien (2017) pointed to the indistinct language of Australia's educational frameworks and curriculums as muddying the water for their interpretation in the field, particularly in relation to collaborative partnerships between educators and families. Following this, the national assessment and rating data evidenced an opportunity for improvement to practices for 65% of ECEC services (ACECQA, 2021). Findings from this current study and the insights extrapolated in this paper, contribute positively to improving the actualisation of collaboratively partnerships in the field. The illumination of major themes of the study (i.e., the influence of space, remarkable relationships, embedded and alive philosophies, and responsive and differentiated connections) from exceeding rating services have been translated here into mechanisms by which educators and families can formulate and develop high-quality collaborative partnerships.

Conclusion

This paper exposed a number of key components and inclusions to collaborative partnerships evidenced by stakeholders in three exceeding rated ECEC services who were participants in a major research project. The mechanisms through which these components were actualised in practice were outlined through the themes: the influence of space, remarkable relationships, embedded and alive philosophies and responsive and differentiated connections. Brought to light through observation, interviews, and situational analysis mapping, these insights extend upon existing understandings of collaborative partnerships while offering clarity in translating research findings and policy into everyday field practices. It is important for all educators and families to engage in collaborative partnership practices towards improved outcomes for children, and the insights provided here illuminate further mechanisms by which to achieve this goal.

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8.3. Links and Implications

This paper extends the existing body of literature and research on collaborative partnerships in early childhood education and care and offers new understandings for the field. The paper provided for researchers and the ECEC community a novel observational framework, the Situated Evidence Tool (SET), developed to enhance the documentation and evidencing of observations from multiple perspectives cognisant of multiple influences and factors. Sharing key insights that emerged from the data regarding mechanisms of actualisation of key components to collaborative partnerships, this article provided a translation of scholarly findings into tangible practices for ECEC professionals.

The multiple truths of stakeholders sharing the lived experience of collaborative partnerships were brought to life through this study. The findings evidenced key components and inclusions to high quality collaborative partnerships that were valuable to both educators and families. The revelation of such findings has implications on the field and future policy.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION



Researcher Memo

At the outset of this doctoral journey, I was motivated to better understand collaborative partnerships for two reasons. As an operator of ECEC services I witnessed the significant impact successful collaborative partnerships have on the experiences of educators and families, on outcomes for the child, and on service quality. As an academic, I felt called to action by the works of Rouse (2012), Rouse and O'Brien (2017), Hadley and Rouse (2018), Cutshaw et al. (2022); Vuorinen (2020) and other scholars of collaborative partnerships and family engagement. In undertaking this body of work my ultimate goal was to support the ECEC field in translating policy discourse and scholarly findings into everyday practice. Great contributions have been made to understandings of collaborative partnerships by the aforementioned researchers, and it is my hope that "Mason" will be added to that list through the contributions of this thesis.

9.1. Introduction

This research study explored the interactions, experiences, and perceptions of ECPs and families in relation to high quality collaborative partnerships. Set in services rated as Exceeding Australia's NQS a strengths-based approach harnessed the complexities of these relationships and interactions exposing through observations, interviews and situational analysis mapping, insights that positively contribute to the research community and ECEC field. In Chapter One a contextual orientation around the goals and research questions of the study, illuminating the significance of collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings was provided. Chapter Two highlighted the vast interdisciplinary understandings of collaborative partnerships, and their value and positioning in early childhood globally. A critical review of the literature exposed tensions in the implementation of collaborative

partnerships and the positioning of families and educators in these relationships. The paucity of observational studies that championed stakeholder voice was identified, with an opportunity exposed to provide clarity in understandings of, and mechanisms by which, collaborative partnerships are actualised in practice.

Chapter Three presented Article One published in the Early Childhood Education Journal, *Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor* (Mason et al., 2023). This article provided a review of international insights into considerations of collaborative partnerships. Further, it offered the conceptualisation of metaphor as a method by which to undertake the process of gaining conceptual clarity, as well as demonstrating the existing literature.

Chapter Four outlined the methodological approach of the study and the significance of an aligned research design. The poststructural paradigm and philosophical orientations of the researcher were interwoven in decision making processes around the justification for the use of case study, and methods including observation, semi structured interviews, and SA.

In Chapter Five Article Two which was published in the International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education, *Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study* (Mason, 2023) was presented. This article detailed the process of undertaking SA as a simultaneous yet non-linear data collection and analysis method that celebrated the poststructural underpinnings of the research intent.

Presented in Chapter Six was the third article of this thesis, entitled *Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research [under review]*. A novel technique, Meta Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM) was shared

in this paper, provoking theorists in the research field to consider metacognitive processes as enhancing integrity and reliability.

Chapter Seven discussed the key insights of the study, oriented by the three goals that set the direction of the investigation and complemented the associated research questions. Key insights included embedded and alive philosophies, remarkable relationships, the influence of space, responsive and differentiated connections and finally, components and inclusions to high quality collaborative partnerships. Providing conceptual and practical contributions to the early childhood field, these insights embraced descriptions and observations of high-quality collaborative partnerships that positively contribute to the paucity of stakeholder voice and observational techniques identified in the literature review.

Article Four, the final paper of this thesis, was presented in Chapter Eight *“Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings”*. This paper detailed one section of findings and subsequent insights from the research study. The article offered to the field for consideration the mechanisms by which the components of collaborative partnerships were actualised in practice, towards improved outcomes in the ECEC field.

As the final chapter, Chapter Nine now outlines the significant contributions made by this research study. A summary of these contributions, including theoretical, methodological, and practical are followed by a discussion of recommendations and future research opportunities before outlining the conclusion to the thesis.

9.2. Contributions of the Current Research

This study investigated the phenomenon of collaborative partnerships in early childhood education and care settings and has yielded numerous contributions to:

- theory (i.e., nuanced use of poststructural case study and situational analysis methods);
- method (i.e., observational techniques and the development of an observational tool);
- practice (several practice models for the ECEC field);
- as well as significant research outputs in the form of four journal articles.

The details of these contributions will now be extrapolated further.

9.2.1. A Poststructural Case Study Approach and Use of Situational Analysis

This thesis advances knowledge on poststructural case study and the use of situational analysis. A theoretical contribution is a process of theory development and advancement in existing theory. Building on prior ways of utilising a poststructural case study, this study used situation analysis to surface stakeholder voice through participatory collaborative mapping, drawing out the multiple truths of participants in a lived experience. A strong research paradigm wove throughout the formulation of the research goals and questions, into the design decisions and methodological choices, to the presentation of findings. Engaging a continuous process of interlocking with the poststructural approach enhanced the study's rigour and tightly bound the study with its intentions while concurrently providing the flexibility needed to investigate the fragmented nature of collaborative partnerships, a complex social construction in a constant state of flux. A nuanced application of SA was undertaken during the second interview of the data collection phase in this study. The researcher and participants collaborated in situational (relational) mapping. Surfacing significant and valuable data in the form of the maps themselves, and the transcripts of the discussions from during the mapping offer new opportunities for researchers and participants. Furthermore, the confirmation of

messy maps by participants served as a member checking process enhancing trustworthiness.

9.2.2. Methodological Contributions of Observational Techniques and the Development of the Situated Evidence Tool (SET)

Engaging in observational techniques in this study afforded for data gathering a holistic bird's eye view of the research situation, including explicit and tacit learnings. The observational technique afforded the viewing of collaborative partnerships during this study, which included drop off and pick up routines in ECEC services. By collecting data with this method, the current study contributed to filling the void in existing research as called for by Almendingen et al. (2021); Coelho et al. (2018) and Vuorinen (2020) which was for observational techniques to evidence interactions and communication between stakeholders.

Supported by the underpinning poststructural orientation of this study, the SET (Figure 9.1) was developed for undertaking observations in early childhood settings as it had the ability to expose a variety of interactions and elements. Developed by the researcher, the SET overlaid the principles of the AEIOU Framework (Hanington & Martin, 2012) with the NQS Quality Area in focus. Offering a methodological contribution, the SET provides a useful framework for collecting data using observation. Additionally, it offers application in the field as a useful tool for ECEC services to utilise in a self-assessment or critical reflection process in preparation for Assessment and Rating. The SET has further application for Authorised Officers who are conducting the assessments to notarise service's attainment of Quality Areas throughout their observational visits as part of the A&R process because it explicitly evidences the requirements of the NQS more deeply than the existing A&R Instrument, and accounts for a variety of perspectives.

Figure 9.1

Situated Evidence Tool (SET)

Activities are goal-directed sets of actions—purposive, to accomplish. What are the main people who work in, and the specific activities and processes they go through?	Environments include the entire arena where activities take place. What is the character and function of the space overall, of each individual's spaces, and of shared spaces?	Interactions are between a person and someone or something else; they are the building blocks of activities. What is the nature of routine and special interactions between people, between people and objects in their environment, and across distances?	Objects are building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or accidental uses (thus changing their function, meaning and content). What are the objects and devices people have in their environments and how do they relate to their activities?	Users are the people whose behaviors, preferences, and needs are being observed. Who is there? What are their roles and relationships? What are their values and propensities?
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.1	Supportive relationships with families	Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role		
6.1.1	Engagement with the service	Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.2	Parent views are respected	The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.1.3	Families are supported	Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
Standard	Concept	Description	Observed Action/Evidence	Prompt/Discussion for Interview
6.2	Collaborative Partnerships	Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing		
6.2.1	Transitions	Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.2	Access and participation	Effective partnership supports children's access, inclusion and participation in the program		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
6.2.3	Community engagement	The service builds relationships and engages with its community.		
Activity	Environment	Interaction	Object	User
What are people doing? What actions and behaviors are people taking to reach goals?	How are they using env? What role does environment play? What is the overall setting in which the activities are taking place? How are people behaving in the environment?	Do you see routines? Interactions between people and objects - What are the basic interactions occurring for people to reach goals? What effect do people have on activities and environment?	What is used and what is not? Describe engagement with object - Are there obstacles? What are all the details that form the environment? How do objects relate to people, activities and interactions?	Who? What are their roles? How defined? Who are the people being observed? What are their personalities like? How do they engage with other people to reach goals?

Note: Full version available in Section 4.6 Data Collection

9.2.3. Embedded and Alive Philosophies

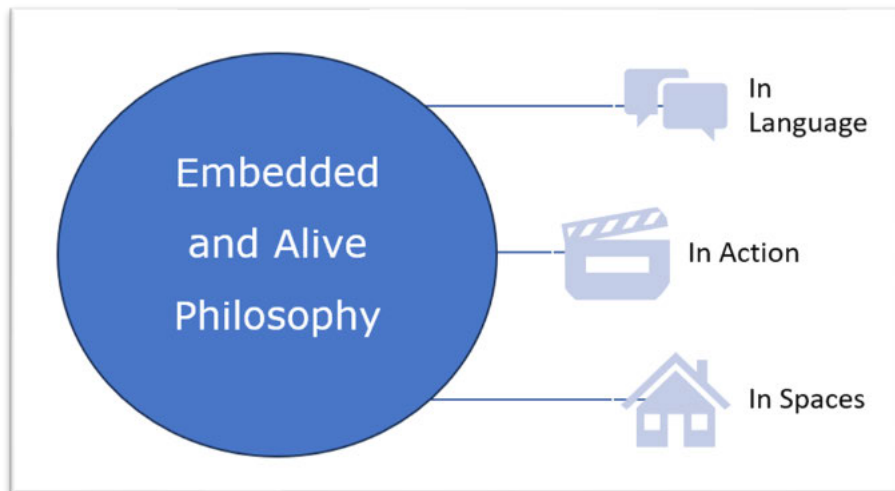
The findings of this study point to an increasing need for service operators and policy makers to bring into focus the prominence and influence that an embedded and alive philosophy has on an ECEC service, particularly the collaborative partnerships that operate within them. While harnessing the value and importance of collaborative partnerships forms an entire Quality Area of Australia's NQS (two standards and six elements), the engagement and enactment of a service philosophy is only referenced once across the full forty elements that make up the entire NQS. The only reference to philosophy is Element 7.1.1, Service Philosophy and Purpose, states “a statement of philosophy guides all aspects of the service’s operations” (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023, p. 314).

Previously alluded to in literature by Dahlberg and Moss (2005), a misalignment of philosophy could pose a barrier to the implementation and success of collaborative partnership attempts. This research contributes new knowledge valuable to both policy makers and educators as it extends upon these findings to showcase from a strengths-based perspective the power of service philosophies to guide practices, as intended in NQS Element 7.1.1., illuminating how the philosophy should underpin daily operational decisions. Sharing an understanding of this philosophy for all stakeholders is also a prescribed expectation. The guide to the NQF suggests this might be reflected in the policies and procedures, the environment, in educators planning for children, as well as in induction for staff and enrolment for families (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2023).

In the participant services, high quality collaborative partnerships were observed as operating around a centralised and prominent philosophy that was embedded and alive in action, in language and in spaces (see Figure 9.2). Educators and families who actively seek out and enact embedded and alive philosophies that align stakeholder's and service values, contribute to the success of collaborative partnerships. This is important because as was evidenced in this study, the alignment of philosophies became a determining factor to the success of collaborative partnerships. Existing research evidenced that flowing on from these successful partnerships are positive outcomes for the child and increased ECEC service quality.

Figure 9.2

Embedded and Alive Philosophy



Note: Full version available in Section 7.1.1

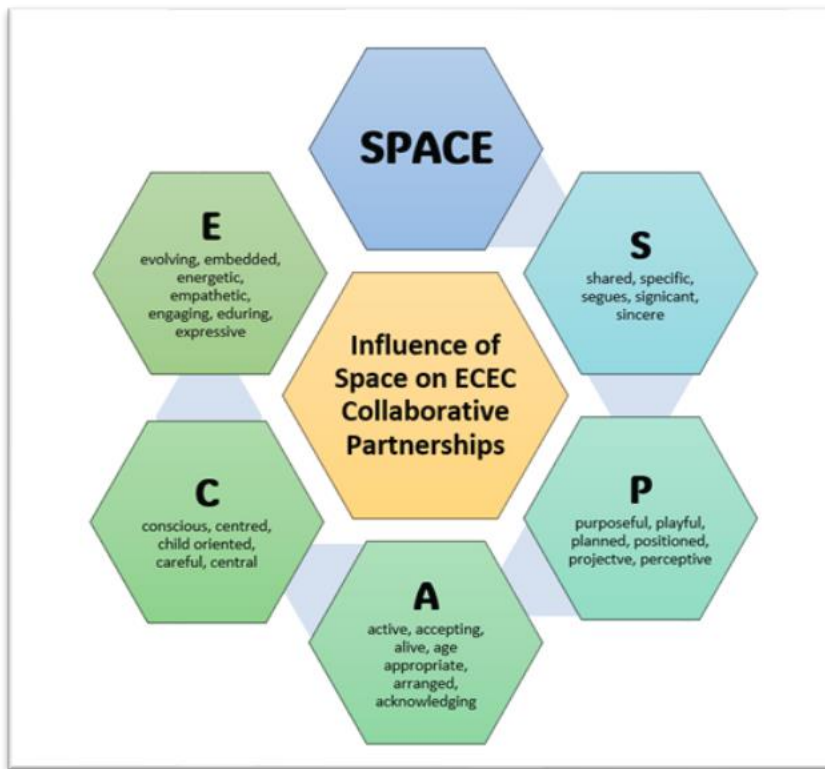
9.2.4. The Influence of Space

The *influence of space* components that surfaced throughout observations (see Appendix F, and Figure 9.3) and are offered as a guide to the field when considering the creation and development of spaces, or as a critical reflection on existing spaces.

The *influence of space* (Section 7.2) is extended upon here to offer an adaptation to Lefebvre's spatial triad model. In 1991, French philosopher Lefebvre developed the spatial triad (Lefebvre, 1974) for urban planning. Current research makes further contribution to engaging with Lefebvre's spatial triad as its value and use resonates with the poststructural tenets of this study. A relativist ontological positioning underpins the poststructural orientations of this study, viewing participants subjective interpretations of social worlds as offering opportunities for the co-construction meaning.

Figure 9.3

The Influence of Space

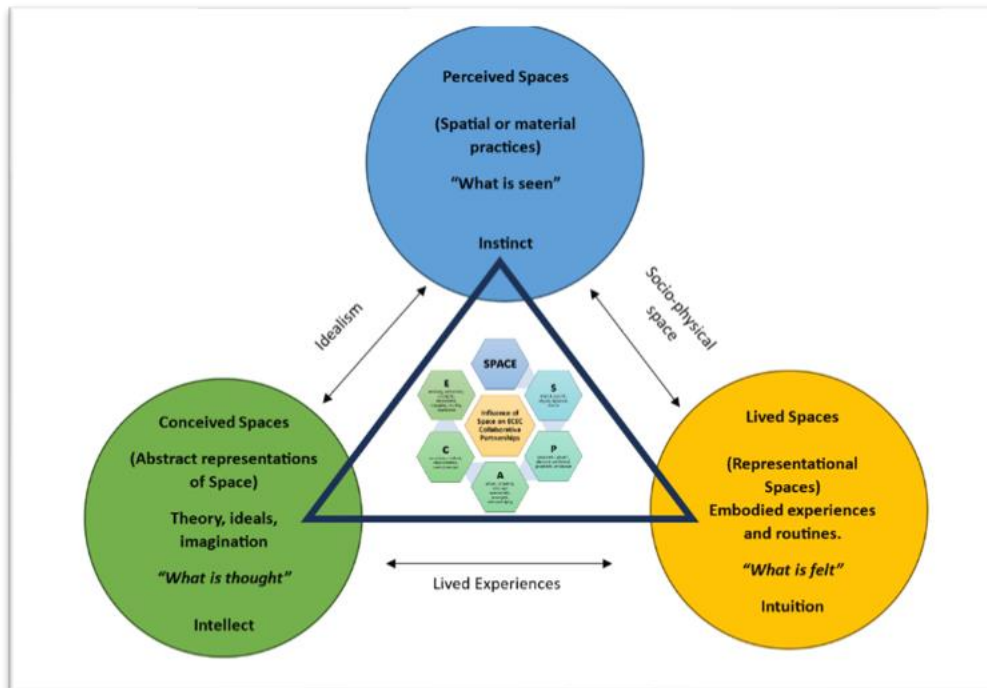


Note: Full version available in Section 7.2.1

A goal of this study was to draw out multiple perspectives, and therefore multiple truths. The culmination of engaging in collaborative situational analysis mapping with participants, together with the use of observational tools such as the SET have resulted in new understandings. An adaptation to Lefebvre's spatial triad offered here (Figure 9.4) harnessed the interwoven and nonlinear poststructural approach of this study. Furthermore, Figure 9.4 draws together multiple data collection methods to provide a holistic view of ECEC spaces where no one viewpoint of the triad is privileged over another. As a result, the Lefebvre's spatial triad has been adapted to include *influence of space* in the central social and learning space (seen previously in Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.4

Adaptation to Lefebvre's Spatial Triad



Note: The influence of space adaptation to Lefebvre's spatial triad by Mason (2024).

Adapted from works by Lefebvre (1974) and Pipitone and Raghavan (2017).

Omitted in the current field of research is the consideration of how the centralised learning space operates within the lives, perceived and conceived spaces, and this adaptation to Lefebvre's triad offers this extension.

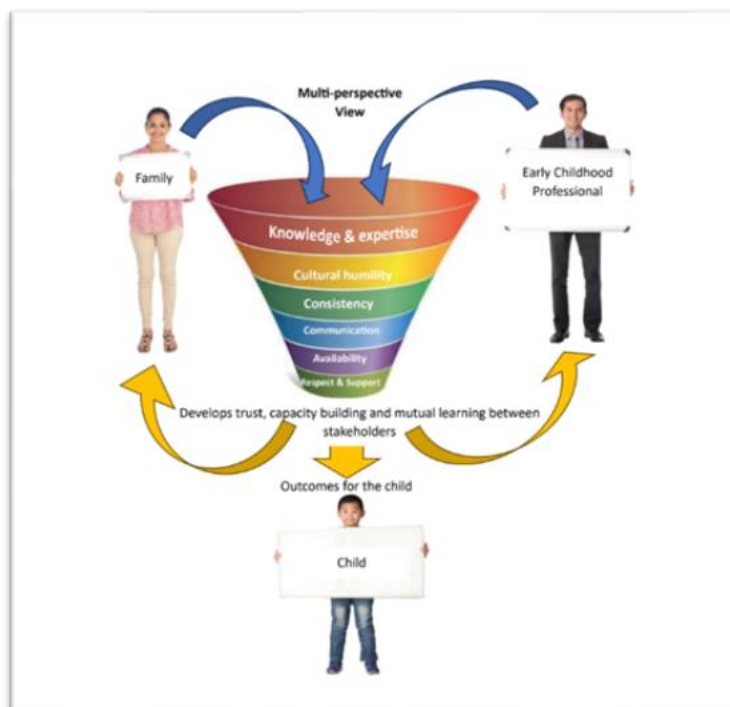
9.2.5. Remarkable Relationships and Antecedents to Trust

The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of how educators and families collaborate, and the mechanisms by which they actualise this in practice. Offering a framework through which to consider the value of, and practices that develop remarkable relationships, the remarkable relationships framework (Figure 9.5) detailed in Section 5.1.2 would be of use to stakeholders, educators, and families alike. It offers a tangible, and visual guide that explicates clearly how each member of a collaborative partnership contributes with value, to outcomes for the child. Furthermore, sitting within the remarkable relationships

framework are the antecedents to trust. These antecedents: consistency, communication, availability, respect, and support, offer a conceptual contribution to considerations of collaborative partnerships that require trust between stakeholders. The antecedents offer new knowledge that extends existing understandings of trust and in collaborative partnerships models to provide educators and families with strategies in ECEC settings.

Figure 9.5

Remarkable Relationships Framework



Note: Full version available in Section 7.1.2

Having established foundational contributions to their shared way of working through remarkable relationships, educators and families build upon these towards the enactment of collaborative partnership components and continued connections.

9.2.6. Layered and Sequenced Components and Inclusions in Responsive and Differentiated Collaborative Partnerships

A major finding of this study, the *Collaborative Partnerships Pathway* in Figure 9.6, delivers the key components and inclusions of educator-family collaborative

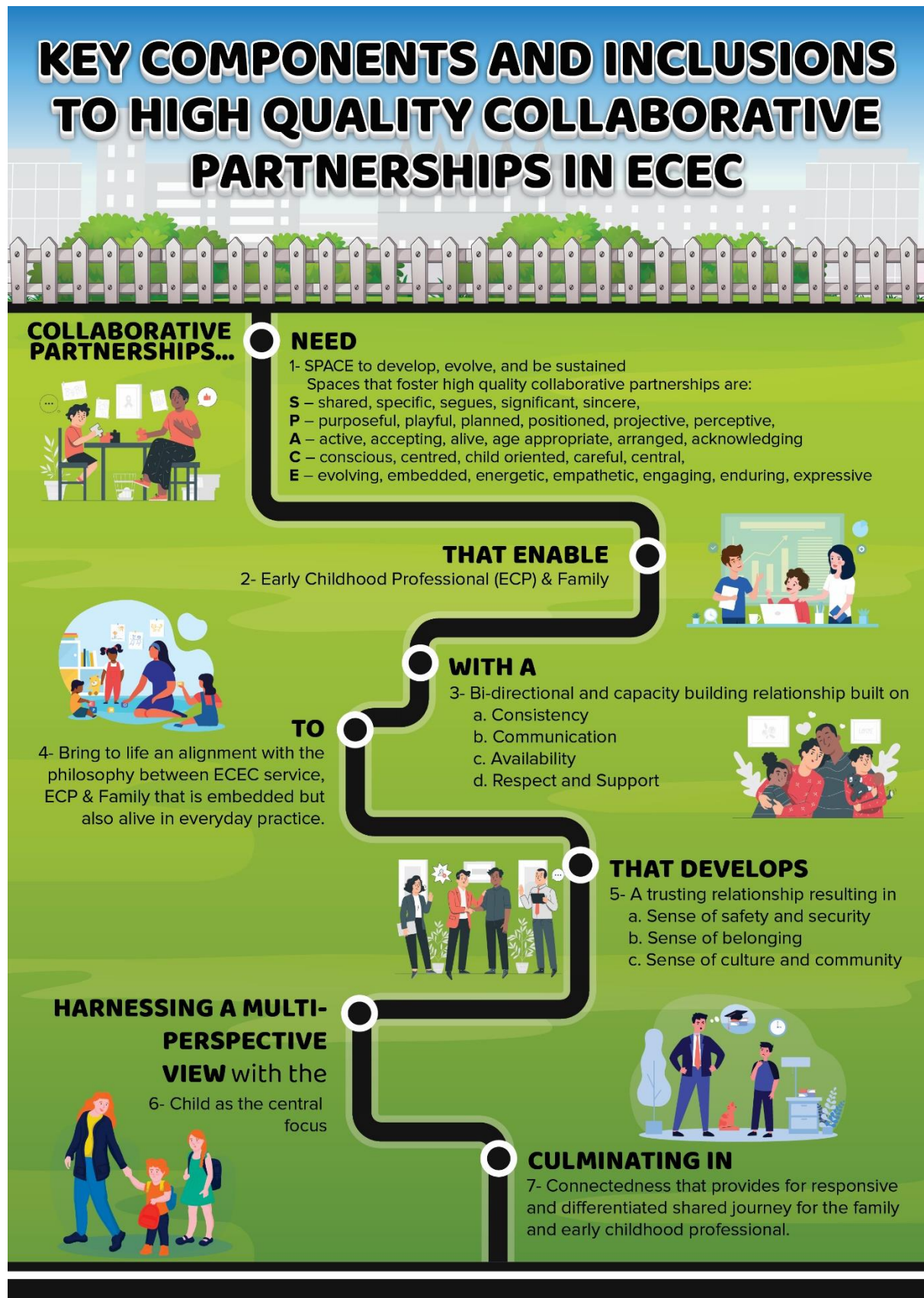
partnerships found in this study. The model provides ECEC service operators, centre directors, educators, and families with a guide to the development of high-quality collaborative partnerships.

Considerations for the order in which these components are sequenced is not intended to be dictated by this pathway model, rather the pivot points operate like GPS locations along a journey towards the attainment of high-quality collaborative partnerships. The Collaborative Partnership Pathway encapsulates ways of working previously not clearly portrayed in an easy to follow visual because the process is fluid and often interwoven. Furthermore, data from the study shows that this way of working was effectual in exceeding rated ECEC services.

Each educator-family relationship is unique, differentiated, and responsive to the stakeholders. As such, the pathway may progress via different pivot points for each individual journey. This model makes a significant contribution to the ECEC field as it provides a visual guide for educators and families to come together to negotiate their relationship and intentions to collaborate. From a practical perspective, this pathway would be a useful inclusion in parent handbooks to support conversations, and the development of collaborative partnership relationships. Additionally, this resource would support educators in further understanding the mechanisms through which they can facilitate and enhance connections with families towards successful collaborative partnerships. Furthermore, research (Akhtar et al., 2019; Bordogna, 2020; Liu et al., 2017) suggests that many organisations struggle to effectively develop and enact quality collaborative partnerships, so it could be assumed that the process captured here could be beneficial more broadly, perhaps in settings globally or beyond the realm of education.

Figure 9.6

Collaborative Partnerships Pathway



The approach offered through the Collaborative Partnerships Pathway model in Figure 9.6 will prove useful in expanding understandings of how educators and families develop and operate in collaborative partnerships.

9.2.7. Research Outputs

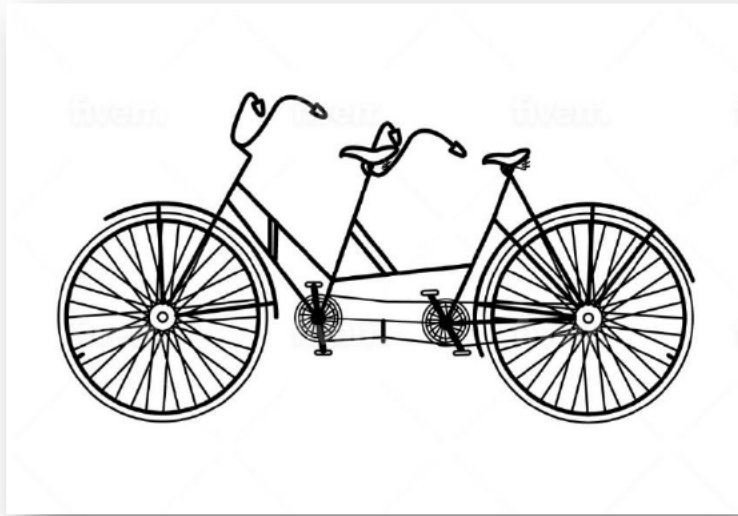
Research outputs were a feature of this thesis by publication. Significantly, the study offered the opportunity for four research publication outputs that contribute to the field of literature regarding collaborative partnerships and the use of situational analysis research methods.

Article 1.

The first article of this thesis, *Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor* (Mason et al., 2023), was published in the international Q1 journal, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, providing for dissemination of the literature review for this study. It shared conceptual insights, offered novel techniques for literature reviews using metaphor, and proposed new thinking around the mechanisms by which stakeholder participate in collaborative partnerships. Offering metaphor as a means by which to gain conceptual clarity, this paper outlined the complex process of reviewing literature while also sharing meaning in conceptualising ideas with a broad audience. Furthermore, the authors proposed the metaphor of the tandem bicycle (Figure 9.7) as representative of collaborative partnerships between educators and families in ECEC. A tandem bicycle, its parts, and the process of riding disrupted existing rhetoric of collaborative partnership models towards a reflexive approach that harnessed power imbalances in a positive light.

Figure 9.7

Tandem Bicycle of Collaborative Partnerships



Article 2.

Detailing of the *process* by which SA was conducted in this study forms the second publication *Utilising situational analysis to understand educator-family collaborative partnerships in a poststructural case study* (Mason, 2023). For those who endeavour to utilise this unique methodology, the article offers insights into SA's simultaneous data collection and analysis method and evidences its strong foundational allegiance to poststructural paradigms. Furthermore, this article explicates the capabilities of SA's ability to illuminate multiple perspectives directly from the voice of participants in a collaborative approach to conducting research.

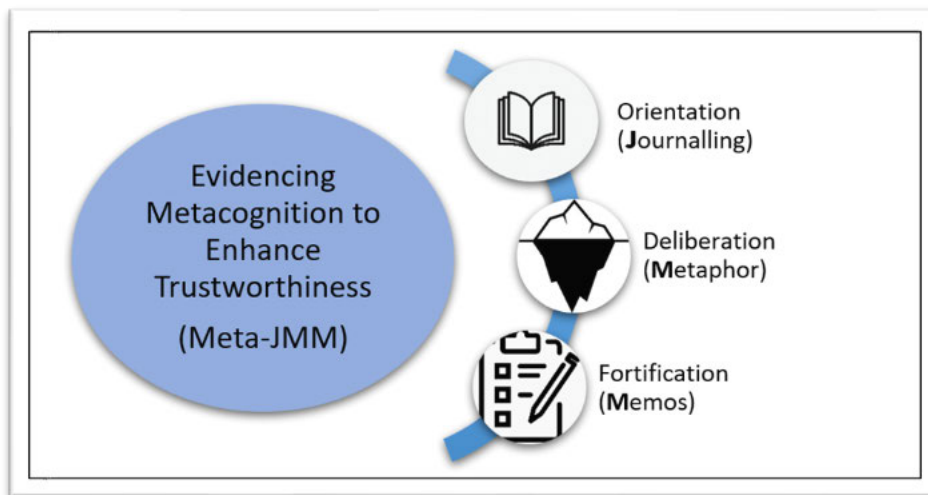
Article 3.

Offering to the research field the novel technique Meta-Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM), the third article of this thesis provides conceptual and methodological contribution. *Evidencing metacognition to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative study [under review]* outlined the Author's high order thinking skills that demonstrated an alignment between the research paradigm, philosophical orientations of the researcher, methodological decisions, and reflexive

considerations of the positioning of self. Integrity and reliability were conveyed through three metacognitive phases of orientation, deliberation, and fortification in the Meta-JMM approach, see Figure 9.8.

Figure 9.8

Meta-JMM Technique



Article 4.

The final publication from this thesis, *Mechanisms of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings*, provides a translation of research findings and insights into tangible practices for the ECEC field to actualise. Illuminated through insights gained from services rated Exceeding the NQS, scholars and educators are provided enhanced clarity around the manner in which collaborative partnerships are developed and enacted. This article shares new understandings gleaned from the current study, having significant implications for educators and families in ECEC services.

9.3. Recommendations

There are eleven recommendations that arise from this study. The findings of this study have been evidenced to support and build upon existing research on

collaborative partnerships in the ECEC field. Challenging taken for granted ways of working and dominant narratives, the insights from this project also propel forward new understandings around the conceptualisation and actualisation of high-quality collaborative partnerships. These recommendations will address the translation of findings across policy, practice, and research.

9.3.1. Recommendations for Policy

Within the area of policy there are four key recommendations.

1. Policy and curriculum are refined to reflect tangible definitions and actionable guides to support the enactment of collaborative partnerships in practice with clarity and intent, representative of all stakeholders. The data in this study clearly surfaced the need for frameworks that document the expectations of educator-family relationships to ensure guidance of practice, through demonstratable and authentic examples for all stakeholders.
2. Policy makers recognise the changing landscape of ECEC service delivery and flow on impact to the positioning of families and educators. Data from this study clearly showed that education policy needs to acknowledge the complexities of the educator-family relationship and support the real life intentions to collaborative partnership efforts by all stakeholders, in order to be effectual at an exceeding level. Arising from the data, it was clear that the uniqueness of each stakeholder's experience impacted their ability to engage successfully in collaborative partnerships.
3. Future research is required and should consider the complexities of educator-family relationships in services not yet meeting the NQS. This study only investigated participants experiences in exceeding rated services, therefore,

opportunity exists to explore services not meeting the national standard in collaborative partnerships.

4. Policy and curriculum documentation of Australia's NQF is required to be written equally for families who are key stakeholders as well as for educators, recognising the family's unique, valuable, and varied positioning and roles.

The data from this study reflects family's engagement with these NQF documents is implied, however, no explicit evidence of this engagement was found.

9.3.2. Recommendations for Practice

A further four key recommendations are provided for the ECEC field in practice.

5. Ongoing professional development must be easily accessible for all ECEC staff and stakeholders to maximise outcomes. This can be achieved by upskilling stakeholders in ways to build relationships between educators and families, where the skills and expertise of all people contribute a multi-perspective view of the child towards the attainment of greater outcomes, and successful collaborative partnerships. Data from this study demonstrated the positive impact of each participant deeply knowing their other stakeholder in the educator-family relationship. The activation of this understanding by each stakeholder enabled the elevating of skills and knowledge in the collaborative partnership, promoting shared learning, capacity building and outcomes for the child.
6. Professional development be provided for educators to support the translation of policy and curriculum documents into actionable practices for success. The data in this study surfaced a way of working to enact the transition (i.e.,

Collaborative Partnership Pathways) which policy makers and training organisation should use.

7. Families should be offered the Collaborative Partnerships Pathway as a guide to enacting their shared journey with educators towards high quality collaborative partnerships. The findings of this research provided insights into the way in which successful educator-family collaborative partnerships functioned, but broader research shows this is not actualised across the sector, and one reason for this may be that there is ambiguity in the processes of enactment. Through sharing the processes of collaborative partnerships as outlined in the Collaborative Partnership Pathways families will have guidance in achieving shared outcomes with educators.
8. Centre Directors and Educational Leaders should utilise the SET for reflective practices as a self-assessment tool for quality improvement or preparation for assessment and rating. Policy makers should further consider the application of the SET into the A & R Instrument to provide holistic evidence and accountability to rating results. Data from this study evidenced the transparency and trustworthiness of using SET in recording observations. Furthermore, the application of SET supports educators to use critical reflective discussions to inform practice, with considerations of objects and the environment, extending beyond the activity to where participants are involved in the interactions, which is a requirement of evidence at an exceeding level of the NQS.

9.3.3. Recommendations for Research

Finally, this study offers the research field three recommendations.

9. Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervisors consider the promotion of studies using a poststructural oriented lens to expose researchers to the value of

investigating complex relationships, including broader applications of situational analysis in participatory research and advocacy for the promotion of participant voice. This study surfaced nuanced opportunities to capture the complexities of the phenomenon that would not have been brought to light by more traditional methods and provided an opportunity for the HDR supervisors to deepen their knowledge of poststructurally oriented studies.

10. Researchers continue to streamline terms and models towards the mechanics of actualising high quality collaborative partnerships. This study's synthesis of existing considerations of collaborative partnerships harnessed their value, while extending upon unrealised opportunities towards the development of new understandings that highlighted the mechanisms by which high quality collaborative partnerships are enacted.
11. Researchers consider adopting new ways of working including observational techniques, and the use of the Meta-JMM technique to enhance trustworthiness. This study demonstrated a technique, used effectually by the researcher to consider the positioning of self throughout the current research project, through three metacognitive phases (i.e., orientation, deliberation, and fortification). Integrity and trustworthiness were evidenced through a transparent process of researcher engagement in critical reflexive practices, a tangible alignment of the research paradigm to research decision making, and explication of the steps taken in attaining the higher order metacognitive processes off Meta-JMM. The issue of researcher positioning is an intriguing one and could be usefully explored further through the application of the Meta-JMM technique.

The recommendations highlight that educators, families, and scholars would benefit from the significant contributions of this study to policy, practice, and research in the future.

9.4. Limitations and Delimitations

While this study has positively contributed significantly to existing understanding of collaborative partnerships, with application of findings and insights being valuable to the ECEC and research fields, it remains important to acknowledge its limitations. Conducted across three case sites, the study captured data across inner city and regional areas of Southeast Queensland, and the experiences of six participants from various diverse backgrounds including socio-economic, cultural and religious. While there may be some generalisation to similar settings, it is acknowledged these may be limited.

This study was undertaken using a small sample size and non-probability sampling of participants. Research (Sandelowski, 1995; Vasileiou et al., 2018) suggest that while a small sample may limit generalisability, it affords the opportunity for a deep dive into the lived experiences. A delimitation of this study was the small sample of three participant ECEC services imposed by the qualifying parameter of being rated exceeding the NQS in QA1 and QA6, and further narrowed by geographic restriction of their Queensland locality. Furthermore, availability and willingness led to the final recruitment of three early childhood professionals and three family members participants. Positively, the small sample meant that meaningful engagements could be captured, brought forward a considerable amount of data including the rich life experiences of stakeholders, aligning with the goals of the study. The richness of these qualitative insights promoted the lived experiences and stakeholder voice to represent their multiple truths, without the intention to be

representative of the broader population. The explanatory strengths of this approach (Eastwood et al., 2016) bring to light causal mechanisms. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work offers valuable insights into deep exploration of high-quality collaborative partnerships with services rated Exceeding the NQS.

In choosing the method of case study, and the use of SA, it was recognised that the generalisability of these findings could be subject to certain limitations and therefore is discussed here. For instance, the replicability of data collected using methods such as observations and situational mapping may mean that researchers may draw varied conclusions from the same data. A criticism of qualitative research is the lack of generalisability, however this is not the goal of undertaking such a study (Grzanka, 2020). As Clarke (2005) wrote, “all knowledge [is] socially and culturally produced” (p. xxiv), with the intention to reveal truths (Martin et al., 2016). Observations provide a rich data source in a short period of time while situated within the research context (Clarke et al., 2022; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Minimising the impact of observation on participants made this a useful tool in documenting everyday practice. Data and field notes offered additional stimulus for reflection and discussion during later interviews with participants (Bartley & Brooks, 2021). As a complementary approach to data collection, observations were a valuable method by which to inform the research questions.

Similarly to observations, the replicability of situational mapping could be considered a limitation of this study as each researcher will conduct mapping differently and derive nuanced meaning from maps. As a research instrument themselves (Clarke, 2005), the researcher and their contribution to the research are harnessed in situational analysis (Gluck, 2018). However, as detailed previously the novel use of mapping in collaboration with participants enhanced the trustworthiness

of the study through member checking and the co-construction of meaning. The use of multiple data collection methods informing situational maps, social world arena maps and positional maps adds to their credibility in presenting findings from the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity was an essential element to engaging in this method which led to the use of the researcher journal and constant critical reflection of researcher positioning (Ademolu, 2023; Clarke, 2005), in an attempt to limit bias.

Since the study was limited to only one researcher, it was not possible to eliminate bias completely. Significant endeavours were made to mitigate or minimise bias throughout the study. Utilised the Meta-Journal, Metaphor, Memo (Meta-JMM) technique consistently, the researcher engaged in reflexive practices, displaying with transparency her decision-making processes. The chosen poststructural paradigm and methodological choices embraced the researcher's subjectivities in this study and illuminated these contributing to enhanced rigour and validity (Armstrong et al., 2011; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Finally, the study did not include children as stakeholders and active participants in this consideration of collaborative partnerships. Likewise, the ECEC service management teams and governance structures, and their influence on collaborative partnerships within the setting were noted but not investigated in this study. Future research might consider these additional stakeholders when undertaking further studies in collaborative partnerships. Despite its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the depth and breadth of research and insight into the development and functioning of high-quality collaborative partnerships in early childhood settings.

9.5. Conclusion

This poststructural case study employed observations, interviews, and SA to obtain a deep understanding of high-quality collaborative partnerships within ECEC services rated exceeding Australia's national quality benchmark. Three goals drove the direction of the study with the intent, being, to harness educator and families' experiences of collaborative partnerships; to observe and investigate their interactions; and explore the key components and inclusions of these high-quality collaborative partnerships. The insights gained from this study's data and findings offer opportunities for positive contributions to theory, policy, practice, and highlight future research opportunities.



Researcher Memo

As I neared the end of my Doctoral journey, I presented at the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC) Research Symposium, sharing my research design, methodology and one small part of the findings. After my presentation, one attendee commented on my study [I paraphrase] “it’s not all rainbows and rose-coloured glasses”, going on to say that what I found in my study was not the reality in most ECEC services. I chose to respond by reiterating the celebration of a strengths-based approach, and how the experiences of stakeholders in services rated as Exceeding our national benchmark could shed light on their ways of working. Therefore, as a researcher, ultimately, I could translate these findings into tangible supports for educators and families in collaborative partnerships in the 65% of Australian ECEC services who were striving to be exceeding. I defended the approach of not identifying the deficit, shifting the narrative. In the same way, in our (my supervisors and my) publication “Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor” (Mason et al., 2023), we provoked a shifting narrative around harnessing power imbalances in a positive light, as educators and families ride a tandem bicycle of collaborative partnership. I own and operate two large ECEC services of my own. I have one foot in academia and one in the field, I don’t have my head in the clouds! I have spent the last five years of my life with the goal to conduct research that not only adds to scholarly research and contributes to unique methodologies, but most importantly, impacts the ECEC field at a practice level.

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APPENDIX A: INTERNATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT GOALS

The below table was adapted by the researcher using data from the Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care Report.

Table A.1

International Early Childhood Curriculum Frameworks and Parent Engagement Goals

Country	Name of the curriculum framework	Age group covered	Goals stated in frameworks highlight the importance of cooperation with families to support the goals for children
Australia	Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Belgium (Flanders)	Decision of the Flemish Government of 27 May 1997 on determining the developmental aims and attainment targets of regular elementary education	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
	A pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddlers	Age 0 to 2	Yes
Canada	Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Early Learning Framework	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs	Age 0 to 2	Yes

	Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Curriculum maternelle	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
	Curriculum éducatif Services de garde francophone du Nouveau-Brunswick	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Kindergarten Curriculum	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
	New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care -English	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Accueillir la petite enfance	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Canada	Essential Learning Experiences	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide	Age 0 to 2	Yes
Chile	Curricular Bases of Early Childhood Education	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Framework for Good Teaching at Early Childhood Education	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Czech Republic	Framework Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education (FEP PE)	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Denmark	The pedagogical curriculum	Integrated for age 0 to	Yes





		5/primary school entry	
Estonia	National Curriculum for the Preschool Child Care Institution	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Finland	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	National Core Curriculum for pre-primary education	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
France	Pre-elementary education: an only cycle, fundamental for the success of all	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Germany	The Bavarian Framework for Early Education (for children aged 0 to school entry) (BayBEP*) including a short summary of the Bavarian Guidelines for Education (BayBL**)	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Germany	Bridging Diversity - an Early Years Programme	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Germany	Principles of elementary education	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	No
Germany	Principles of education for children aged 0 to 10 in child-daycare-facilities and primary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Iceland	The Icelandic national curriculum guide for preschools	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Ireland	Aistear - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Israel	Frameworks specific to different learning areas	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
Japan	National Curriculum Standards for Kindergarten	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes

	National Curriculum Standards for Day-Care Centre	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	National Curriculum Standards for Integrated Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Luxembourg	National Curriculum for pre-primary and primary education.	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
	National Reference Framework for non-formal education for Children and Youth	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Mexico	A good start	Age 0 to 2	Yes
	Key learnings for integral education. Preschool education. Plan and study programs, didactic orientations and evaluation suggestions	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
New Zealand	Early childhood curriculum Te Whariki	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Early childhood curriculum language nests	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Norway	Framework Plan for Kindergartens	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Portugal	Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Slovak Republic	State educational program for pre-primary education in kinderkartens	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Slovenia	Kindergarten Curriculum	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Kindergarten Curriculum for adapted programmes for preschool children	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes

South Africa	The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Switzerland	Concept for family childcare pedagogy	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Curriculum (kindergarten, primary, secondary)	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	No
	Guidelines for day care of children from kindergarten to primary school age	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Orientation framework for ECEC	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Quality in centre-based childcare	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
Turkey	Education Program for 0-36 Months	Age 0 to 2	Yes
	Special early childhood education program	Age 0 to 2	Yes
	Preschool Education Program	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
	Special preschool education program	Age 3 to 5/primary school entry	Yes
UK (England)	Early Years Foundation Stage Framework	Integrated for age 0 to 5/primary school entry	No

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Below is a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) sent to services as part of recruitment for the study.

 University of Southern Queensland Participant Information Sheet	
USQ HREC Approval number: H21REA115	
Host Service Information Sheet	
Project Title	
Unearthing shared support relationships between Early Childhood Professionals and families in contributing to collaborative partnerships, utilising Situational Analysis (SA) and poststructural case study design.	
Research team contact details	
Principal Investigator Details	Supervisor
Ms Kathryn Mason 	Dr Alice Brown 
	Dr Susan Carter 
Description	
<p>This project is being undertaken as part of Doctor of Philosophy through the University of Southern Queensland.</p> <p>The purpose of this project is to celebrate the exemplary practices taking place in Early Education & Care services between Early Childhood Professionals (ECPs) and families, and the impact of this shared support relationship on quality. The intention of this study is to better understand the strengths of the interactions and relationships between Early Childhood Professionals and parents. As a researcher I am keen to know more about how this relationship evolves and the positive impact of this.</p> <p>Relationships with families are acclaimed as foundational for success in Australia's Early Education Curriculums. The National Quality Standard, Quality Area 6 Collaborative Partnerships with families and community, and the Early Years Learning Framework Principal 2 Partnerships guide these practices in the field. Family centred practices and models of partnership champion the essence of empowerment of both families and educators as experts in contributing to outcomes for children, and service quality. Families are children's first educators, bringing with them competencies that can reciprocally support the Early Childhood Professional. Harnessing the richness of opportunities available when Early Childhood Professionals and families engage in a shared support relationship is evidenced in the practices at [enter name of participant service].</p> <p>It is the goal of this research project to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>to observe and investigate the interactions between an Early Childhood Professional and families to better understand how these interactions foster collaborative partnerships</i>• <i>to investigate the diverse and holistic nature of Early Childhood Professional roles in interacting with parents, with a focus on what enables or creates opportunities for a positive collaborative partnership</i>• <i>understand more deeply the components and inclusions that reflect exceeding practices in collaborative partnerships</i>	

Participation

The research team request your assistance because you are able to provide valuable insights into this positive and supportive relationship between parents and Early Childhood Professionals. Your everyday interactions demonstrate the exemplary practices that the researcher wishes to promote to the broader education community.

Your service is identified having received and "Exceeding" rating under the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] Rating and Assessment in Quality Area 1 Program and Practice, and Quality Area 6 – Collaborative Partnerships with families and community. For this reason, the research team are keen to observe your Early Childhood Professionals as they would demonstrate exemplary practices in parent engagement as defined in the National Quality Standard, Quality Area 6- Collaborative Partnerships with families and community, and Early Years Learning Framework Principal 2 – Partnerships.

Your service's participation in the study will involve:

- A brief conversation with your Center Manager to discuss the study, its intent and impact on the service. This will also support your management team in identifying and approaching potential Early Childhood Professionals to participate in the study.
- The researcher would ask that your ECP or Center Manager approach parents to offer an opportunity to participate in the study, and gain their consent to participate.
- The researcher would attend your service for up to 3 days (in the same week) to observe the drop off and pick up routines of families, looking specifically at the interactions between the ECP and the primary caregiver at these handover times. For example, the researcher would attend on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 730am-9am and 3pm-5pm to make observations.
- Following this, a mutually agreeable time would be made with the service, the ECP and the parent in order to conduct two half hour interviews with each participant. The researcher would require a small meeting space (office, library nook, unused classroom space) to conduct a short interview. The first and second interviews with each participant would be approximately two weeks apart.

An example of the **types of questions** that will be asked are of the ECP and family:

1. Please share with me a little about you and your family
2. I am interested to know more about your interactions with Early Childhood Professional/Family, could you share with me what a typical drop off or pick up might look like? The types of discussions you have, or information that you share with each other?

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You may also request that any data collected about you be withdrawn and confidentially destroyed. If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about yourself please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, or not take part, or take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland or your Early Education & Care service.

Expected benefits

It is expected that this project has the potential to directly benefit you, your child and the broader field of education.

1. It is expected that this research project will further serve to energise the positive engagements between Early childhood professionals and families who participate in this study. The strengths-based championing of the existing interactions will be reinforced in a positive light, further encouraging the exemplary practices under investigation.
2. The research will provide participants with a voice in identifying ways of working that promote a shared support relationship between Early childhood professional and family, with positive outcomes on children and service quality.
3. Engaging in the project has the potential to assist participants in broadening their skills in communication and collaborative engagements with stakeholders, and expand their understanding of the implications of this.
4. Sharing an understanding of effective practices has the potential to impact policies and practices in the field of education.

Participants will receive no incentives to participate in this study.

Risks

Negligible risks to the participants are anticipated as a result of taking part in this research.

Short term risks include:

1. Time imposition for the early childhood professional and participant families. This will be approximately two 30-minute interviews per participant. The researcher will be entirely flexible and arrange semi-structured interviews (2x 30 minute) at times that suit each participant.
2. Inconvenience for the service of having a researcher in the space. As an early childhood professional herself, the researcher is acutely aware of the legislative and regulatory requirements on services and would at all times act in a manner to minimise impact on the service both during observation and interviews.
3. Mild discomfort potential – participants will be asked to reflect on their own professional practice &/or engagements with other stakeholders. As this study's focus is on investigating the exemplary practices, it is not an examination of the participants themselves. This is an opportunity to promote and highlight the positive shared support relationship being enacted currently. Whilst it is unlikely, should a participant feel discomfort at any stage of the interview they will be able to request a short break, or to stop the interview. Access to support services such as Lifeline (call 13 11 14) and Beyond Blue (1300 22 4636) are provided.

The researcher will conduct themselves, and the research process, within the Early Childhood Code of Ethics, and the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research at all times.

Privacy and confidentiality

All comments and responses are confidential unless required by law.

- interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription
- you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for review and endorsement prior to inclusion in the project data
- The recordings will not be used for any other purposes.

- Professional transcription services will be employed, utilising Pacific Transcription services.
- Photos will not include faces or names to provide for anonymity of participants.

Your data will not be available for use in future research. Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely, as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data and Primary Materials Management Procedure. During this study, data will be stored securely both online and on an external harddrive. Following completion of this study, data will be destroyed. Any sharing of data (in the form of the final thesis or publications from this work) will contain non-identifiable data.

You are able to access the results of the project summary by contacting me via email Kathryn.Mason@usq.edu.au once this phase of the study is complete.

Consent to participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to a member of the Research team prior to participating in your interview.

Questions


Please refer to the Research team contact details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland, Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can address your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this document for your information.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

	University of Southern Queensland Consent form Observation & Interview
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Project Title: **USQ HREC Approval number: H21REA115**

Unearthing shared support relationships between Early Childhood Professionals and families in contributing to collaborative partnerships, utilising Situational Analysis (SA) and poststructural case study design.

Research team contact details

Principal Investigator Details

Ms Kathryn Mason



Supervisor

Dr Alice Brown




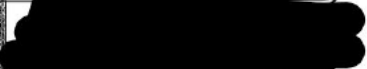
Dr Susan Carter



Statement of consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project. ☒ Yes / ☐ No
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction. ☒ Yes / ☐ No
- Understand that if you have any additional questions, you can contact the research team. ☒ Yes / ☐ No
- Are over 18 years of age. ☒ Yes / ☐ No
- Understand that the interview will be audio recorded ☒ Yes / ☐ No
- Agree to participate in the project. ☒ Yes / ☐ No

Name (first & last)	
Signature	
Date	27/9/2022.

Please return this document to a research team member before undertaking the interview.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Examples of Interview Questions

Interview Questions - Educator

- How long have you been at the service?
What do you feel makes this place special?
- Has it evolved over time?
What creates the sense of community and connection here?
- Tell me about the process when a family joins your service/room? What does that look like?
- How do you communicate with families? About the child, their day, centre information?
- Who is your centre EDL? What does their support to you look like? In what ways do you work together?
- What do collaborative partnerships look like for you? Between families and educators
- When you're building those relationships – is it with child or parent first?
- What impacts CPs when transitioning between rooms?
- What makes the biggest impact in
 - creating Collaborative Partnerships
 - sustaining Collaborative Partnerships
- What does it feel like to be in a collaborative partnership with a family?
- As an exceeding service what do you do particularly well in this area?
- If you had advice for services who are working towards achieving the relationships, you have here with their families what would it be?

Interview Questions – Family Member

- How long have you been at the service?
What do you feel makes this place special?
- Are you aware of the NQS? Did you know the centre was Exceeding NQS
- What creates the sense of community and connection here?
- Tell me about the process your family joins your service/room? What does that look like?
- What did your settling in process look like?
- Walk me through a typical drop off or pick up?
- What does communication with the centre look like? About the child, their day, centre information?
- Do you get to know Director and educators, or just classroom for your child?
- What do successful collaborative partnerships look like for you? Between families and educators
- When you're building those relationships – is it with child or parent first?
- What impacts CPs when transitioning between rooms?
- Things don't always go to plan – when issues are raised how is that managed?
- What makes the biggest impact in
 - 1 – creating Collaborative Partnerships
 - 2 – sustaining Collaborative Partnerships
- What does it feel like to be in a collaborative partnership with a educator at your child's centre?
- As an exceeding service what does this centre do particularly well?
- If you had advice for services who are working towards achieving the relationships, you have here what would it be?

APPENDIX E: SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS MAPS

Example of Collaborative Situational (Relational) Mapping

Figure E.1

Situational (Relational) Map with Parent Participant Naomi from Mountain Kids

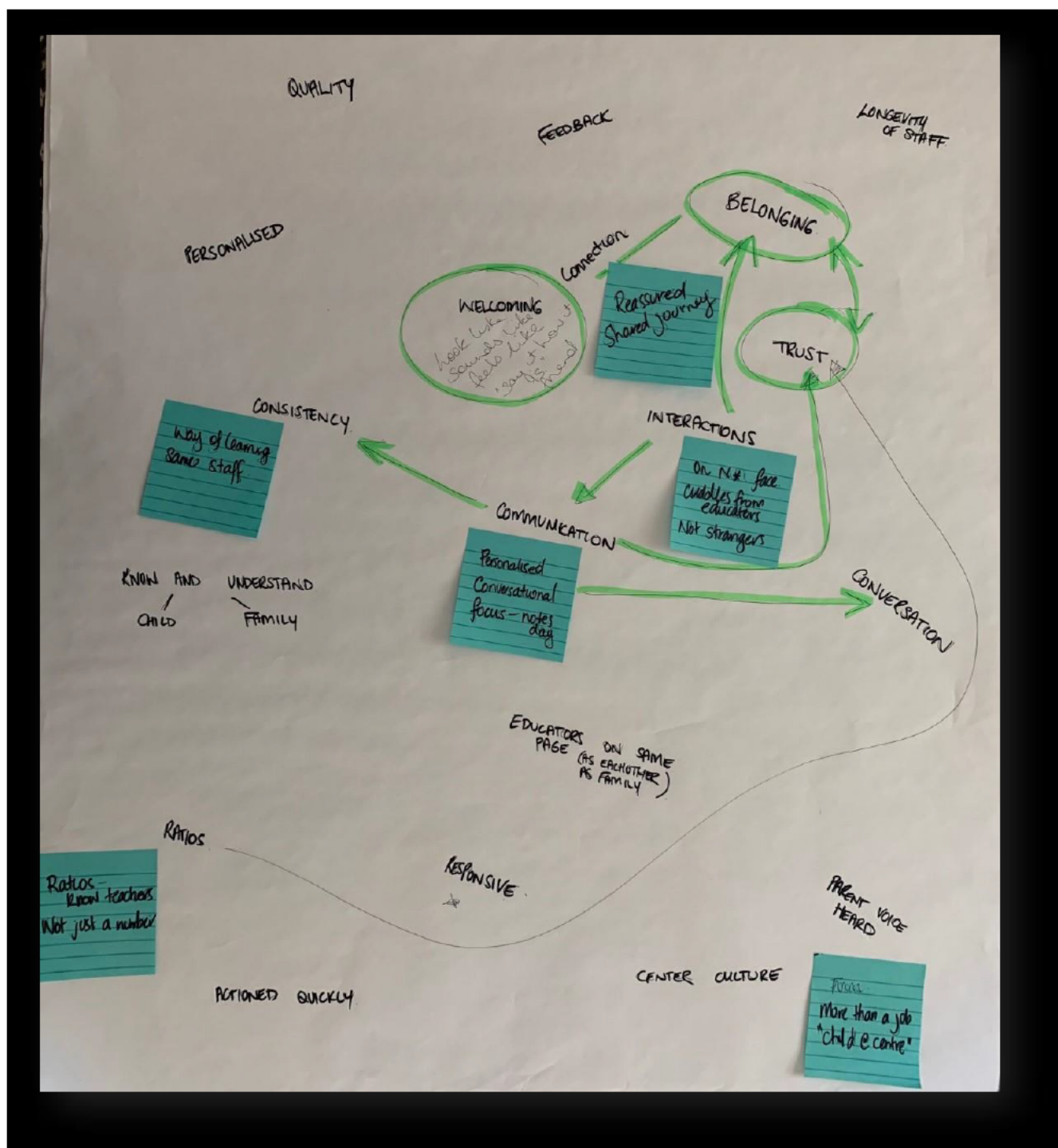
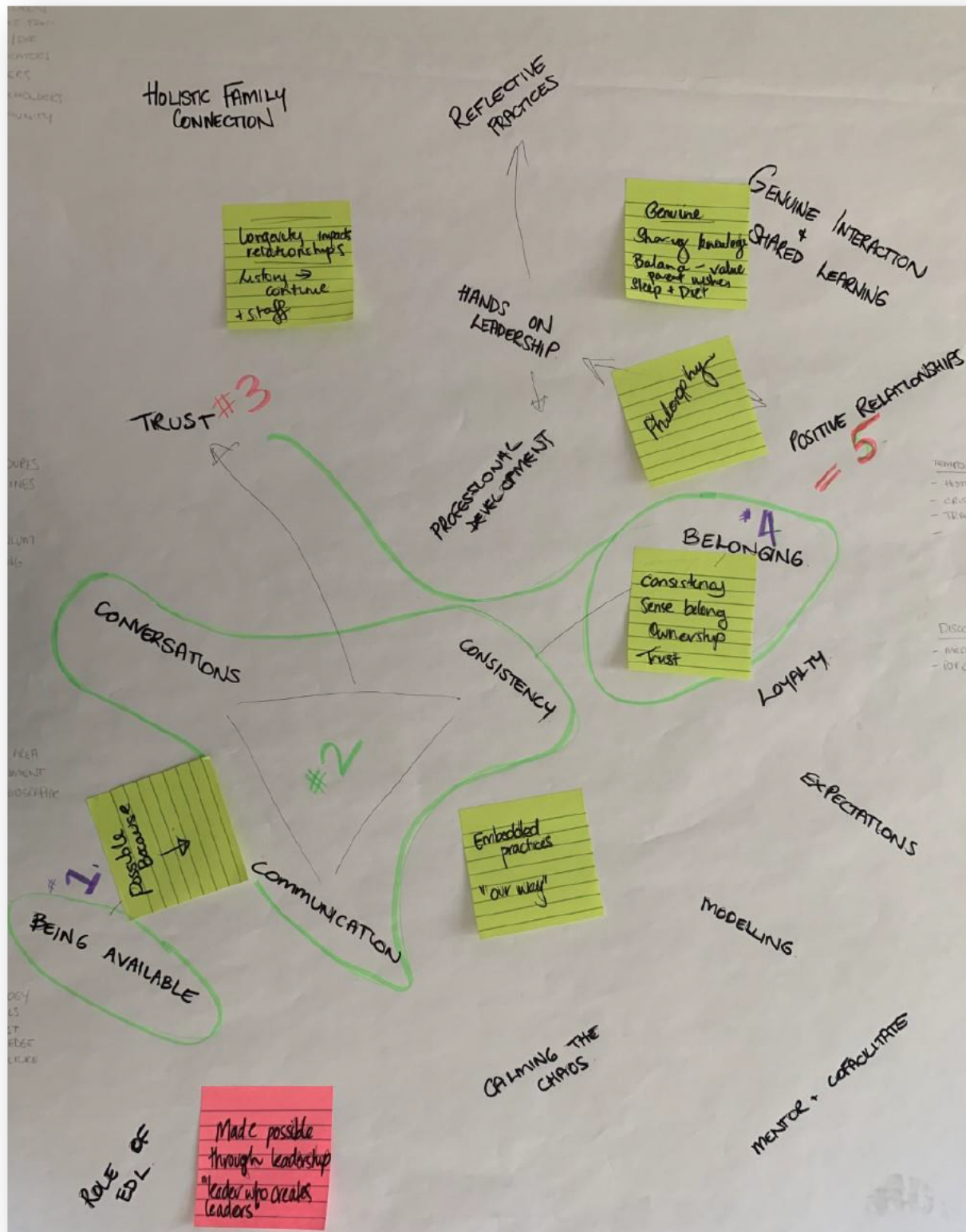


Figure E.2

Situational (Relational) Mapping with ECP Participant Martha from Mountain Kids



APPENDIX F: THE INFLUENCE OF S-P-A-C-E

Table F.1

Examples of the Influence of Space on ECEC Collaborative Partnerships

S	Shared	All stakeholders (children, families, educators, and management) felt comfortable, with a sense of autonomy and ownership in the space
	Specific	Spaces were thoughtfully designed with purpose tied to the philosophy (e.g. the colours of the classroom wall or style of toys available), to the use of communication books, whiteboards or apps reflecting stakeholder needs and preferences
	Segues	Spaces facilitated the <i>flow</i> of collaborative partnerships. These were meeting places, or pivot points, where stakeholders engaged, but also passed through (e.g. There is no foyer or office space at Gumnut Childcare*, however closest to the entrance is a half-height stable door to the nursery classroom. Chelsea* spends a significant portion of the morning and afternoon routine engaging with children, families, and educators from across the whole service as they come and go).
	Significant	Spaces were meaningful. The space told a story. In some settings this is a home like history where three generations have attended the service, and their photos adorn the wall; in other settings this significance was the community garden as the centrepiece of the playground. Each has meaning.
	Sincere	Spaces reflected sincerity. The community was genuinely welcome to participate in the community garden given its central location as an active part of the ECEC service, not tucked away as a once used initiative. Sincerity was the welcoming nature of family and educator retreat spaces, for breastfeeding mothers, for a quiet reading or support area.

P	Purposeful	Spaces had purpose. Their intention was evidenced through their design. The path families took to move from the foyer to the classroom was outdoors, these spaces provided for interactions with other children, families, and educators as part of morning and afternoon routines.
	Playful	The ultimate purpose of ECEC spaces were playfulness. They were inviting for children and offered a diverse range of quiet and soft to loud and adventurous spaces to learn and grow.
	Planned	Spaces were considered by the way they were used, and by whom. For examples, a shelf placed above 1500mm was for adult use. These contained notebooks, pens, emergency bags etc. Spaces planned for children included mirrors at their level, notebooks, and pencils for them to pass on messages to their educators also, as part of the drop off routine. Toddlers could draw how they were feeling, or how they slept.

	Positioned	Spaces supported the positioning of educators around the setting to facilitate quality interactions while maintaining supervision. The layout of the outdoor playground provided one main access point for families, meaning all educators, scattered throughout the playground had eyesight of the arrivals and departures, without leaving the children they supervised in that space. A simple wave and hello immediately acknowledged the family's presence. Families often paused with children to scan the space for friends and educators before proceeding to rooms.
	Projective	Spaces projected expectations through the use of space. Indoor and outdoor spaces provided intentionality through drink bottle trolleys, shoe and hat storage, or lockers. While simple, the consistency provided for supportive routines, and quality interactions between stakeholders
	Perceptive	Perceptive spaces considered diverse needs. This enabled the space to be manipulated in a reactionary sense as needs change.

A	Active	Spaces in ECEC were busy, and as such "calming the chaos" (Martha* Mountain Kids*) was an important aspect of these findings. The active engagement of children and adults in the spaces was a focus of creating calm.
	Accepting	Space offered openness and opportunity to diversity. Examples included a variety of languages in displays, to ramps for disabled access to playground structures.
	Alive	Spaces were energised. Nooks, corners and crannies were all utilised (there are no dead spaces).
	Age appropriate	Spaces and the resourcing within reflected an understanding and respect for the user (be it adult and or child)
	Arranged	Spaced reflected purpose, their arrangement was considered, showing intent on how it would be engaged with, or the impact that space might have on interactions.
	Acknowledging	Spaces were a representation of those who used them, they evidenced cultural backgrounds of stakeholders, or they evidenced the way stakeholders liked to share meals

C	Conscious	Highlighting the thoughtfulness of the space itself, the user and the function.
	Centred	Centred spaces refer to an alignment with the philosophy and values of the service. The space was centred and interwoven around these.
	Child oriented	Remaining true to the intention of ECEC services goals being outcomes for the child, the underpinning use of spaces were child oriented.
	Careful	Careful planning of spaces evidenced forethought around their use and purpose, and by whom in what way. Even laundry spaces had careful planning to ensure a streamlining

		of time and efficiency, clear communication, cleanliness, and facilitation of a supportive environment
	Central	Centrally located spaces, meeting places, facilitating small and large groups, spaces are central to evidencing ECEC intentions

E	Evolving	The ever-changing nature of ECEC means that the spaces must evolve and reflect these changes. Be it formally in changes to legislation and regulation, or by critical reflection a change to policy and procedure, through to the development and attainment of higher risk profiles meaning children's resources can advance. Spaces need to evolve with and for the service
	Embedded	As defined, embedded means spaces are consistent and interwoven with the philosophy of the service and the needs and interests of the stakeholders
	Energetic	Spaces in ECEC were fun, to draw in the active engagement and participation of children, families, educators and community.
	Empathetic	Understanding those who used the space was reflected in an empathetic approach. The nature of ECEC spaces as shared facilities required a reflection of the feelings encountered within them. Space were responsive and empathetic
	Engaging	From foyers, to nappy change stations, to play grounds, every space was an opportunity to engage stakeholder.
	Enduring	ECEC spaces have longevity. They reflect the ebb and flow of industry changes and trends, and the priorities of the families and communities in which they sit. They endure, and reflecting these histories is valuable in critical reflections and space considerations
	Expressive	Spaces reflected the needs and interests of stakeholders. Initiatives came alive in community gardens, or whole centre AUSLAN communication. The spaces themselves expressed <i>how</i> stakeholders came together and why