

**Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care:  
An investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and  
parents**

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## Abstract

Early childhood education and care in Australia is recognised as playing an important role in determining the long term educational benefits and outcomes for children across their life span. A key determinant of a quality early childhood program is the quality of relationships that educators develop with parents and families as equal partners in the education and care of young children.

In 2010 the State of Victoria, Australia, launched a framework for educators working in early childhood settings. This framework identified family centred practice (FCP) as the approach to be implemented by educators in their work with families. FCP has been widely used in early childhood intervention programs since the latter part of the 20th century; however, this approach had not previously been adopted in mainstream early childhood education and care contexts.

Using a qualitative case study approach the overall aim of this study was to explore the interactions and relationships that existed between educators and parents in an early childhood education and care centre in order to analyse and identify the extent these could be described as fitting within FCP. Adopting a symbolic interactionist approach to viewing the data, the researcher was able to interpret the language used by the participants to gain an understanding of the relationships that participants believed were present. Engagement of the literature led to the evolution of a model that positioned FCP within a broader partnership framework and it was this model that guided the analysis. Symbolic Interactionism sits alongside theories of social ecology as it is the notion of creating shared understanding and meaning through interactions, that brings synergies to

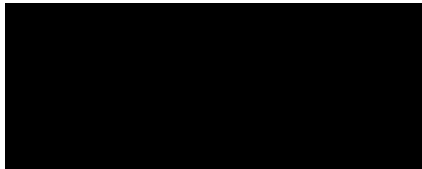
these two perspectives. As such, the study uses a socio-cultural framework to uncover the influencing factors that shaped the nature of the relationships. Six educators working in a single early childhood setting, along with four parents attending the program, were interviewed in early 2011 to gain an understanding of the nature of the interactions and the extent to which they reflect a notion of partnership. The researcher was then able to overlay the model of FCP to examine the extent to which these interactions could be defined as FCP Artefacts used by the centre to engage with families were also analysed to determine how they reflected the key principles and characteristics of FCP as it sits within a partnership framework.

The study found that the interactions between the educators and parents could generally be described as sitting within a model of FCP. However, an underlying philosophy of FCP is that families should be empowered as decision makers for their children; this shared decision making was found to be the most obvious absence in the interactions between the parents and the educators.

## Declaration

I, Elizabeth Jane Rouse, declare that the EdD thesis entitled *Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care: An investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents* is no more than 60,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature



Date 30 April, 2014

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## List of publications and awards

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Rouse, E 2012b Partnerships in early childhood education and care – empowering parents or empowering practitioners *Global Studies of Childhood* **2**(1): 14–25.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix B.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

During the first decade of this century in Australia, early childhood education and care (ECE&C) was finally recognised at a national level for the important role it plays in determining the long-term benefits and outcomes for children and families. Following nearly twelve years of conservative government in Australia, the Australian Labor Party came to power in Australia in November 2007 with a key policy focus on ECE&C. The Labor Party policies identified a goal to ‘put learning and development at the centre of Australia’s approach to ECE&C’ and stated that children should ‘have access to high quality early learning and care’ (Rudd & Maklin, 2007, p. 3). A key determinant of a quality learning program is the relationship that educators develop with parents and families as equal partners in the education and care of children (COAG, 2006, p 12).

The policy platform was enacted through the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) commitment to a program of reform built on a vision of improving the wellbeing of all Australians (COAG, 2006). This led to the development of a National Early Childhood Development Strategy to build the quality of ECE&C across Australia. Through this strategy, a national reform agenda created a focus that placed a heavy emphasis on quality learning and development programs for educators in achieving the best outcomes for children. The enactment of these reforms encompassed the development of national licensing regulations, national quality standards and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to guide the practice of all early childhood educators across Australia, with a focus on children birth to five years. As presented

within this framework. The framework recognises that learning outcomes for children are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families (DEEWD, 2009, p. 12). It is this key principle that has created the impetus for this study, which seeks to explore the nature of the interactions as they reflect partnerships between educators and families.

Concurrent with the national reforms, a focus on ECE&C was also a key direction of the Government of Victoria in 2008 through their *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (DEECD, 2008). This blueprint resulted in the development of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [0–8] (DEECD, 2009), which describes common goals for children from birth to age eight across all early years programs in that state, linking into the first three years of schooling.

This concurrent development of the two frameworks is significant for early childhood educators in Victoria. The Victorian Framework (VEYLDF) was developed to complement the learning outcomes<sup>3</sup> from the EYLF, but also went further, by having an explicit focus on children from birth to eight years. It recognised this age span as being important, and wanted to ensure that when children transition within and between services and move on to formal schooling, these transitions spoke a common language for families and children.

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<sup>3</sup> The five learning outcomes outlined in both the EYLF and the VEYLDF have been identified as:

- children have a strong sense of identity
- children are connected with and contribute to their world
- children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- children are confident and involved learners.
- children are effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19).

While the EYLF provided a framework that targeted educators working across ECE&C settings, the VEYLDF brought together all professionals working with children and families in the target age group (such as maternal and child health nurses, allied health professionals and community workers), described in more common parlance as the ‘early years’.

‘Early years education’ is a concept that is gaining popularity internationally and refers to educational programs for children within the birth to eight age range (Cullen, 2000, p. 3).

The VEYLDF links the five learning outcomes from the EYLF with learning and teaching provided in the Victorian school curriculum, known as the Victoria Essential Learning Standards (VELS).

The Victorian State Government is the key funding body, and (at the time of this study) was the licensing body for all children and family services programs in that state. As such, all services and education settings were expected to adopt the implementation of this framework. Several advisory committees (comprising, academics, peak bodies and practitioners) were established to inform and guide the development of the VEYLDF, which mirrored and complemented that of the EYLF, because the thinking behind the development of the VEYLDF fed into the national working party designing and developing the EYLF.

The VEYLDF outlines eight guiding principles for practice. These are grouped into three interrelated and interwoven categories designed to inform one another. These are defined as:

- collaborative – focusing on relationships:

- family-centred practice
- partnerships with professionals
- high expectations for every child
- effective – focusing on practice:
  - equity and diversity
  - respectful relationships and responsive engagement
  - integrated teaching and learning approaches
  - assessment for learning and development
- reflective – focusing inwardly on the professional:
  - reflective practice (DEECD, 2009, p. 9).

## **1.2 Positioning partnerships**

The EYLF presents a position that learning outcomes for children are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families. As with the VEYLDF, it recognises that families are children's first and most influential teachers, and thus create environments where all children and families are welcomed, respected and actively encouraged to collaborate about curriculum decisions in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful. The EYLF outlines a view of partnerships as being based on the foundations of understanding one another's expectations and attitudes, and building on the strength of one another's knowledge.

The EYLF holds that in genuine partnerships, families and early childhood educators:

- value each other's knowledge of each child
- value each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life



- trust each other
- communicate freely and respectfully with each other
- share insights and perspectives about each child
- engage in shared decision-making (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13).

While there is an explicit reference to partnerships within the EYLF, and a clear outline of what these partnerships might look like, this discussion of partnerships is not so explicit in the VEYLDF. The notion of partnership within the VEYLDF is more implied, and any explicit reference to partnerships with parents or families is scarce. The only specific reference to educators working in partnership with families comes with the acknowledgement that:

children’s learning and development is advanced when they are provided with opportunities, support and engagement within their families and in partnership with early childhood professionals (DEECD, 2009, p. 9).

Where the EYLF speaks of ‘valuing’, ‘respecting’, ‘trusting’ and ‘sharing’, the language of FCP uses terms such as ‘welcoming’ ‘culturally inclusive’ and ‘engagement’. ‘Shared decision making’ is common across both documents. The relationships between the professionals and families, as outlined in the VEYLDF, centres on these relationships being those of family-centred practice (FCP).

### **1.3 Family-centred practice and the early childhood field**

The VEYLDF recognises that ‘children’s learning and development takes place in the context of their families, and that families are children’s first and most important educators’ (DEECD, 2009, p. 7), acknowledging the diversity of cultures, customs and

backgrounds of families. The VEYLDF also identifies that ‘children’s learning and development is advanced when they are provided with opportunities, support and engagement within their families and in partnership with early childhood professionals’ (p. 9). With this understanding, family-centred practice (FCP) has been included as a collaborative practice principle to be incorporated across all early years programs in Victoria. FCP has been used in early childhood intervention programs in Victoria since the early 1990s, but until the implementation of the VEYLDF, had not been the practice of non-interventionist practitioners in working with families. The term FCP, when included within the Victorian Framework, was done so without a clear insight being presented to the broader early years field to support understanding of what this practice might involve.

While the Victorian Framework presents FCP as a collaborative practice principle, there has been little research that provides evidence of current understanding, practice and outcomes of adopting this model in mainstream ECE&C. FCP has been used as an approach for working in partnership with families of children with disabilities and developmental delay since the early 1990s, and in Victoria this model has since been adopted as best practice in early childhood intervention programs across the state. It has not been a model widely adopted by mainstream, non-interventionist, ECE &C programs. The introduction of this approach, coming out of the work of Carl Dunst (2002; 2010) and others in the United States, created a way of understanding how families were dealing with the complexities of children experiencing developmental delay, and were negotiating their way around the medical and allied health system. It is the recognition in FCP that families are pivotal influences for the learning and

development of children which provides a link between the implementation of FCP as adopted in early childhood intervention programs and mainstream early years programs as in both the child is seen in the context of their family and community.

When the VEYLDF was introduced there was little clarity or guidelines to support the implementation of FCP in mainstream ECE&C programs. The information made available to the field within the VEYLDF was minimal, merely stating that:

Children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children's learning and development. Professionals too, play a role in advancing children's learning and development. Professionals engage in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children's lives' (DEECD, 2009, p. 10).

The VEYLDF goes on to outline that early childhood professionals will:

- use families' understanding of their children to support shared decision making about each child's learning and development
- create a welcoming and culturally inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to children's learning and development experiences
- actively engage families and children in planning children's learning and development
- provide feedback to families on their children's learning and information about how families can further advance children's learning and development at home and in the community (DEECD, 2009, p. 10).

There is an alignment between the EYLF, which speaks of creating partnership between educators and families, and the VEYLDF, which outlines FCP, creating an opportunity to better understand the nature of the interactions that exist between

educators and parents across the sector while exploring the extent to which these may be identified as FCP.

The development and implementation of effective partnerships can be assumed to be the key premise underlying the inclusion of FCP as a collaborative practice principle for all early childhood educators. Therefore, this research positions FCP as occurring within a wider a theoretical construct of partnership as having mutuality trust and reciprocity (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Keen, 2007; Kruger et al., 2009).

#### **1.4 Aim of the research**

The concurrent introduction of the two framework documents into practice for early childhood educators in Victoria led to a sector where educators were faced with having to make sense of these two documents and how they linked. There was also a need to understand the implications mediating their role within these similar, but in some aspects very different frameworks, and determine what this might mean for educator practice.

The introduction of FCP into the VEYLDF created an environment of uncertainty for educators working across the mainstream ECE&C arena. In this sector little had been understood at the time regarding what this FCP might look like in practice, nor the synergies that existed between FCP and the approach to partnerships as outlined in the EYLF. While there are commonalities in the messages portrayed across the two documents, there are subtle differences in the language used to present them, creating a complexity in interpreting expectations of practice. While FCP was the language used to guide educator practice, where it sits within a broader partnership framework was

not made explicit to the field, and neither was it necessarily understood by those charged with its enactment. The study aimed at providing clarity in understanding the nexus between the two documents. Drawing on literature that examines both partnership and FCP, a model evolved and was developed from a synthesis of the literature that positions FCP within this partnership framework, creating a synergy between the two frameworks. It was this model which subsequently informed the analysis of the data.

The present study investigates the nature of the interactions between parents and educators. Using the developed model as a guiding lens, the study seeks to explore the extent to which these interactions could be deemed as FCP, and in turn be described as a partnership, and how the participants own experiences, beliefs and understanding may have been influencing factors in shaping the nature of these interactions. These findings are important in bringing clarity to the ECE&C sector by making explicit the connections that exist between the two complementary documents, and providing a framework for moving educator practice forward to better meet practice expectations.

## **1.5 The research questions**

The overarching question guiding this research is:

How effective is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between them, as determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity?

In examining this question, the following, more specific questions are used to inform the data collection and analysis:

To what extent can the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators be defined as family-centred practice?

To what extent are the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants?

## **1.6 Overview of the study**

### **1.6.1 The literature review**

To achieve the above aim it is important to position the research within a broader body of literature surrounding partnerships and FCP, as well as the literature examining importance of partnerships within the context of ECE&C. The following three chapters present a discussion informed by the contemporary literature. Chapter 2 begins by investigating the contemporary drivers influencing the development of policy, at both a state and national level, which have led to the development of the national reform agenda and the directions outlined through COAG. This agenda has been informed by the work of notable economists, researchers and academics, and it is important that this be work be outlined and explored within this study.

Chapters 3 and 4 present a theoretical construct for defining partnership as occurring within a framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Kruger et al., 2009) by exploring the concept of partnership as presented in the relevant literature. Chapter 3 begins by examining the evidence outlining the benefits for both

children and families of engaging in partnerships, which has led to the inclusion of partnerships as a key practice principle within the EYLF. It then explores partnership from a theoretical construct, and expands on this to explore the literature relating to partnerships in education. This chapter concludes by providing a targeted discussion relating more specifically to the literature surrounding early childhood educators engaging in partnerships with families. Chapter 4 builds on this investigation of partnerships as presented in the literature to focus more specifically on the perspectives of both teachers and parents. Differing views on the nature and the effectiveness of partnerships by teachers and parents have been found across the literature, and it is important to explore these perspectives as they provide further insight to support this study.

Building on the discussion of partnerships in Chapters 3 and 4, Chapter 5 provides an in-depth exploration of FCP by examining its historical origins in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, as discussed in the literature, and further explores the literature framing FCP from a theoretical perspective. The chapter leads the reader to a discussion on empowerment as a critical underpinning principle in FCP. Chapter 6 discusses the literature on empowerment and examines this in the context of FCP. It is important at this point to differentiate the notion of ‘empowerment’ from that of ‘power’. While power and power imbalances impact on the effectiveness of partnerships, the empowerment of families as key decision makers is an essential aspect of FCP, and is at the core of this study.

### **1.6.2 The evolution of a model – a synthesis of FCP and partnership theory**

The literature chapters come together in Chapter 6, where a model is presented which evolved and was developed through a synthesis of the literature. This pivotal chapter creates a position from which the rest of the study flows. The confluence of the two frameworks for the ECE&C field created a juncture where two different perspectives were presented concurrently to educators to shape the way they determine the nature of the relationships they have with families. The early years educators across Victoria were faced with having to mediate practice within these two policy frameworks. Chapter 6 brings these together in a model where FCP is clearly positioned within a broader partnership framework. The evolved model provides a lens through which to analyse and reflect on practice, and guide conceptual thinking on how relationships sit within the nexus that draws these documents together, filling a conceptual gap missing from the field. The model as it developed is used to inform the data analysis in this study.

### **1.6.3 The research methodology and design**

Chapter 7 outlines the methodology used to frame the study, providing a rationale for using a constructivist approach to frame the study and an exploration of symbolic interactionism as a perspective through which to view the findings. The chapter then builds from this to discuss the research design, outlining the reasons behind the choice of qualitative case study as a methodology and a justification for the use of semi-structured interviews and collection of artefacts as methods to address the research questions. The chapter then describes how the data was analysed and synthesised, leading to a presentation of the findings in the following chapter.



#### **1.6.4 The findings and discussion chapters**

Chapters 9 and 10 present a detailed outline of the findings as they relate to the research questions and the initial aim of the research. These chapters introduce the participants and share their voices. Scattered across these chapters are several individual vignettes, or brief literary ‘sketches’ that offer an insight into each of these participants. This brings life to each individual participant, to show the participants as the researcher saw them. The vignettes create an image reflecting the sense of each person in the research encounters. Chapter 8 then positions the findings from the data in the context of the model of FCP presented in Chapter 6. This model is a lens through which to explore the data to seek out the extent to which the nature of the interactions could be viewed as FCP.

Socio-cultural theory is another lens through which the interactions between the parents and the early childhood educators are viewed in this study. Chapter 9 outlines socio-cultural theory, its origins and its applications in education and wider studies of families and relationships, and examines the relationship between this theory and an understanding of human behaviour. It then presents the analysis of the data as it sits within Rogoff’s planes of analysis or ‘lenses’ through which human learning can be discussed. This chapter provides a significant insight into the influences on the way the participants have discussed the nature of the interactions from their own individual perspectives and the experiences, beliefs and understanding that have shaped these perspectives.

Chapters 11 and 12 offer a deeper discussion of the analysis and the findings by returning to the research questions. Chapter 10 presents an extensive discussion that

responds to the question of the effectiveness of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between the educators and the parents. The discussion centres on the partnerships as determined by the framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity, then further explores the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators should be defined as FCP. Chapter 11 extends this by providing an insightful discussion focusing on the socio-cultural experiences of the participants and the extent to which these have influenced the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood, and why this is important for the early childhood field.

#### **1.6.5 The conclusion**

The final chapter (Chapter 12) concludes the study by returning to the beginning of the journey by discussing the study in the context of the purpose and aims of the research, the significance and limitations of the study and the opportunities it offers for future research. Positioning the study in the context of the time and policy environment prevalent in the sector, this chapter provides a framework for developing professional practice to build the capacity of the field in effectively implementing FCP in their work with families.

## **Chapter 2 Early childhood education and care policy in Australia**

Before examining the nature of the interactions between early childhood educators and the parents of children in their care, it is necessary first to examine the context in which effective family partnerships have been identified as an important and critical aspect of professional practice for early childhood educators. The following three chapters provide a background to the context surrounding the importance of early childhood educators engaging in partnerships with families. This chapter begins by examining the policy directions in the ECE&C sector in Australia at a national level, and more specifically, in the State of Victoria, where the study was undertaken. It also looks at the contemporary drivers influencing the development of these policy directions, which have led to the inclusion of partnerships as a key practice principle for ECE&C programs.

The study began in 2008 when, as a member of the Victorian Learning and Development Advisory Committee developing the VEYLDF, convened by The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the researcher was professionally involved in shaping the directions of both the EYLF and the VEYLDF. During discussions amongst these professionals the decision to include FCP within the framework was made. However, the background to the rationale behind the EYLF and the VEYLDF provides a context in which to place the research, as it was undertaken during a significant time in Australia, when international thinking was shaping Australian early years policy directions.

## **2.1 The Rudd Labor Government**

The election of the Rudd Labor government in November 2007 brought about a change in thinking across politics regarding the value of ECE&C. A profound influence on the development of these policy directions was the positioning of early childhood within an economic sphere, as a consequence of the findings presented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the investment by Australia in the early childhood years, and the research by James Heckman (Heckman & Masterov, 2006) on the rate of return to human capital investment, particularly in the early preschool years.

Much of the policy directions of the then governing Australian Labor Party, and Kevin Rudd as the Prime Minister, were formulated as a result of a body of evidence being presented through the OECD research into ECE&C Starting Strong, and Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006). These studies took a broad and holistic approach to examining ECE&C policies and approaches across several OECD countries, which included Australia, the US and England and several Nordic countries. The main emphasis of this review was the importance placed on economic investment in the early years, and it identifies that in order for nations to prosper in the 21st century they must compete globally, and prosper economically, through having a productive workforce. The OECD argues that investing in human capital through education and training governments can raise productivity and build future prosperity. This view has particular relevance to the early childhood years, as research has shown that these years are most significant for the developing brain (Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The OECD report identifies that Australia was at the lower end of the scale when compared to other countries participating in the review when it came to participation rates and government spending in preschool education (Rudd & Maklin, 2007; Stanley, 2007). By his own admission, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, based much of his policy approaches on the work of James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Science, who investigated the return on investment of investing in the early years. Heckman identifies that the return on investment of job retraining programs is largely ineffective, as it takes too long for the economy to recoup the costs associated with retraining older workers into new skills and trades, and that these skills are more difficult to achieve in older workers (*The Australian*, 19 April 2008). Heckman identifies that learning starts in infancy, long before formal approaches to education begin, and continues through the lifespan. He then turned his attention to the cost-benefits of investing in early childhood through undertaking an analysis of the investments made in early childhood programs (Heckman & Masterov, 2006).

This economic model, known as ‘human capital theory’, considers how, irrespective of neoliberal economic policies, health, education and other welfare policies might enhance economic productivity in the long term (Penn, 2002, p. 118). Human capital has been said to account for ‘three quarters of the producible forms of wealth in wealthy countries’ (Vimpani, 2005, p. 4) and it:

implies that investments in the productive capacities of individuals can improve individual outcomes and that these investments might produce the greatest payoffs when made early in individuals’ lives (RAND Corporation, 2008, pp. 1–2).

Heckman's findings were largely modelled on longitudinal research projects that investigated the efficacy of early intervention programs on future economic cost savings, namely three US studies (High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers). These projects investigated the long-term outcomes for high-risk children from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in enriched early childhood programs, and found that participation led to increased achievement test scores, decreased grade retention, decreased time in special education decreased crime and delinquency, and increased high school graduation, and that the participatory effects persisted through to age twenty-one (Heckman & Masterov, 2006, pp. 37-8). The then prime minister was interested in this research, which led to the formulation of his party's policy for early childhood.

## **2.2 Contemporary influences on policy**

The policy directions placing early childhood in the spotlight were also strongly influenced by several contemporary international research studies that highlighted the importance of the early childhood years, and more particularly, the importance of access to quality early childhood programs. Of significance was the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project* (EPPE) undertaken as a longitudinal study in the UK (Sylva et al., 2004). The outcomes from the project identify several key findings relating to the benefits and outcomes of early preschool education. Of greatest influence on the future policy directions in Australia was the emphasis in the report that quality services were found in settings integrating care and education, where educators create warm, interactive relationships with children. A further study by Cantin et al.

(2012) also identifies that child care service quality has been associated with positive parent–caregiver relationships (p. 267).

Along with the value of ‘relationships’, substantial research by the Carnegie Corporation (1994) into the brain development of children was also influential in driving this policy agenda. This research highlights that brain development prenatally, and in the first three years of life, is more rapid than previously realised, and is much more vulnerable to environmental influence, which is long lasting (Lindsey, 1998, p. 98). Research shows that children need rich and stimulating experiences and environments, and must be ‘mentally and physically active in the process of learning’ (Puckett, Marshall & Davis, 1999, p. 10). The Carnegie report highlights that:

the importance of these early years to the future healthy development of children cannot be minimised. Although children are resilient and can benefit from later intervention, the costs of reversing the effects of a poor start in life increase as the child grows older, and the chances of success diminish (Puckett et al., 1999, p. 10).

These findings influenced the studies by Heckman and others into the economic values of investing in children through strengthening early childhood education, and were subsequently adopted by the Australian Government in designing policy for ECE&C across the nation.

### **2.3 The COAG agenda**

In 2009 COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) released the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy, Investing in the Early Years* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) which had been developed in order to provide a whole-of-government approach to responding to contemporary evidence highlighting the importance of the

early childhood years and the benefits – and cost-effectiveness – of ensuring all children experience a positive early childhood. This strategy also highlighted the importance of families, and the need to support families, in providing positive outcomes for their children (p. 4). The strategy included the development of a national quality framework, which would include the creation of national quality standards, national regulations governing the licensing of early childhood services and the EYLF to govern professional practice across the ECE&C sector. The national quality standards and the national regulations came into being in January 2012, after this research had been completed.

Of particular importance to this strategy is the expectation of early childhood educators that they create and foster positive partnerships with parents. The EYLF became the guiding framework of practice for all early years educators across Australia. Within this framework, partnerships with families have been identified as one of the five key principles that underpin an educator's role, stating that:

[L]earning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families. Educators recognise that families are children's first and most influential teachers. They create a welcoming environment where all children and families are respected and actively encouraged to collaborate with educators about curriculum decisions in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12).

In the National Quality Standards this expectation for practice has been further developed to include as a key quality standard collaborative partnerships with families and communities, in which it is expected that educators engage in respectful and supportive relationships with families. They state that 'partnerships with families



contribute to building a strong, inclusive community within the service'. Shared decision making with families supports consistency between children's experiences at home and at the service, helping children to feel safe, secure and supported (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 148).

## **2.4 The Victorian policy context**

Working in parallel to this was the direction for the ECE&C sector taken by the then newly sworn-in Brumby Government in Victoria, with the commitment to develop a Victorian framework for early years learning and development. The release of the government's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* occurred in 2008. This blueprint acknowledges the need for working with parents and recognises that parents are the first and most enduring influence on children's development (DEECD, 2008, p. 12). This document outlines the policy directions for improving the outcomes for Victoria's children across all sectors of education in that state, and led to the development of a framework for all early years services working with children and families from birth to eight years. Since 2011 The VEYLDF has become the guiding document for professional practice across the state of Victoria for all programs engaging with children and their families in the early years. The national regulations state that all programs must work in accordance with a recognised early years framework, and in Victoria it has been regulated that the VEYLDF is the one to be followed. Like the national framework, relationships with families feature as a key principle that drives educator practice.

The following chapter explores the concept of partnerships in greater depth, providing an insight from the literature as to why partnerships and relationships with families feature so heavily within the policy documents.

## Chapter 3 Why partnerships?

This study is seeking to explore how effective the nature of the interactions are between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between them, as determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity. Given that Family Centred Practice has been singled out in the VEYLDF as the approach for engaging with families, the study aims to explore the degree to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators can be defined as family-centred practice. The study is also interested in examining the extent to which the nature of the interactions are influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants.

In order to answer the key questions guiding the study it is important to first examine the literature that can position the study in the context of a wider contemporary understanding of partnerships in education largely and in early childhood education more specifically. Through a critique of the literature a framework was developed that positioned family centred practice within a notion of partnership which informed the data analysis stage. This framework was used to position the findings within a deeper theoretical perspective. This chapter provides a background to the context surrounding the importance of early childhood educators engaging in partnerships with families.

The following chapter will explore and discuss Family Centred Practice and a theoretical discussion of sociocultural theory will be presented in Chapter 9 to provide a context for exploring the data through a sociocultural lens.

It begins by examining the evidence outlining the benefits for both children and families of forming effective family partnerships in ECE&C programs, which has led to the inclusion of partnerships as a key practice principle for educators in the sector. The chapter then further explores partnership as a conceptual framework through examining a range of literature to draw out key elements and guiding principles in which to position the interactions between parents and educators. This leads to an examination of the literature focusing on partnerships as they sit within the education arena, and more particularly, early childhood education.

### **3.1 Benefits of partnerships with families**

A wealth of literature provides evidence of the importance and improved outcomes for children of engaging effectively with parents in the education and care of young children (Ashton et al., 2008; Duncan, 2007; Epstein, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). In early childhood education in particular, the importance of the partnership between teachers and parents is a central belief (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005). Whalley (2013) argues that there is overwhelming evidence as to the importance for children's learning and development of educators and families engaging in partnerships, and Smith and colleagues (2000, cited in Hedges & Gibbs, 2005) argue that:

a major message emerging from the existing literature on early childhood education... that one cannot consider the two microsystems of family and the early childhood centre in isolation (p. 116).

However, while there is a substantial body of research on the benefits of parent and educator partnerships, Fan & Chen (2001) argue that there has also been some criticism

of the empiricism of this research, because there is an inconsistent understanding of what constitutes parent involvement, and also what constitutes student success. Exactly what these parent–educator partnerships look like, and can be defined in an education context, is somewhat problematic. The literature pertaining to partnerships in education intersperse terms such as ‘parent involvement’ (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Zellman & Perlman, 2006), ‘parent engagement’ (Douglass, 2011) and ‘parent partnership’ in multifaceted ways. Driessens et al. (2005) identify that various terms are used to identify the relationship between parents and teachers, and it has been argued by them and others that the notion of partnership is often ambiguous when examining the relationship between schools and parents (Hedges & Lee, 2010; Martin, 2006; Patrikakou et al., 2005).

Regardless of the terminology used, existing research has identified that parents who are involved in their child’s schooling create an environment for their children in which schooling is seen as important, and they are more able to structure experiences for children that lead to skill development and enhance children’s sense of competence and achievement (Jinnah & Walters, 2008). There is a strong indication that parent involvement in their children’s schooling has a positive effect on academic achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy (Bakker & Denessen, 2007; Cavanagh & Romanoski, 2005; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Ihmeideh et al., 2008; Jeynes, 2010, 2011). It has also be found that parent involvement has a positive effect on children’s attendance, behaviour in the classroom, attitude to schooling and retention (Bakker & Denessen, 2007; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Seginer, 2006; Zellman &

Perlman, 2006). Children who have parents who are involved in their schooling have also been found to have increased self-confidence in their own academic ability and learning, as well as stronger intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ihmeideh et al., 2008). The parents have been found to be more able to help children enhance their perceptions of their own competence and empower children to take control of their own learning (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, cited in Jinnah & Walters, 2008). Duncan (2007) also found that when children observe interactions and mutual respect between adults helps children to understand relationships, develop positive dispositions and feel more comfortable at school.

In the United Kingdom the EPPE project has also identified significantly improved outcomes for children as a consequence of increased participation by parents in their child's learning, finding that more intellectual gains were achieved for children in centres that encouraged high levels of parent engagement in their children's learning. The most effective settings were found to be those that shared child-related information between parents and staff, and parents were often involved in decision making about their child's learning program (Sylva et al., 2004). A further study by Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues also found that when an effective relationship between parents and educators is established, shared aims can be established, leading to better outcomes for the children, even if the centre is not of a high quality (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

Parental involvement has also been shown to provide positive benefits for parents. Parents who are more involved with their children's schooling become knowledgeable about school goals and procedures (Hill & Taylor, cited in Jinnah & Walters, 2008),

leading to stronger engagement with schooling, and so are more able to communicate the importance of education to their children.

Involvement in the child's schooling builds the parents' abilities to help their children learn. These positive attitudes and behaviours in turn influence students' learning and educational success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) because parents become more involved in their children's learning and gain knowledge and strategies for structuring learning experiences and activities for their children that result in skill development (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Jinnah & Walters, 2008). 'Parents' instruction is likely to remain deeply rooted in the child's memories even after they leave school' (Miedel & Reynolds, cited in Imeideh et al., 2008, p. 161), leading to greater outcomes in later life.

### **3.2 Partnership as a theoretical construct**

A key principle in both the national EYLF and the VEYLDF is the engagement of parents as genuine partners in the care and education of the child. Before we may examine the nature of the interactions between educators and parent as they might reflect a genuine partnership, it is first important to establish a theoretical stance that determines the parameters of a partnership. The *Early Years Learning Framework* presents a model of partnership in which partnerships are 'based on the understanding of each other's expectations and attitudes and build on the strength of each other's knowledge' (DEEWR, 2009) identifying that in a genuine partnership:

Families and early childhood educators value each other's knowledge of each child; value each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life; trust each

other; communicate freely and respectfully with each other; share insights and perspectives about each child and engage in shared decision making (p. 12),

The literature surrounding the definition of partnership positions the partnership within a theoretical construct in which the terms trust, reciprocity, mutuality and shared goals and decision making are prevalent. Dunst & Dempsey (2007) position partnership within a premise that the exchanges between parents and professionals are ‘mutual, complementary, joint, and reciprocal’ (p. 308). They identify the key features of partnerships as including dispositions and actions such as mutual regard, joint decision making and joint action, where parents and professionals are working towards a common goal within a relationship based on shared decision making and shared responsibility. Keen (2007) also presents the key characteristics of effective partnerships as including ‘mutual respect, trust and honesty; mutually agreed-upon goals; and shared planning and decision-making’ (p. 340) and these characteristics are mirrored in a definition presented in the *Australian Family–School Partnerships Framework* (DEEWR, 2008) which describes partnerships as being built on mutual trust and respect, and as having shared responsibility for the education of the children and young people at the school (p. 2).

These characteristics are reflected in the stance offered by Alasuutari (2010), who also describes a partnership in terms of trust, respect and equality (p. 106); and by Dunlap & Fox (2007), who identify partnership as having a shared vision, trust and open communication, mutual respect (p. 277). Similarly, Summers and colleagues define partnerships as ‘mutually supportive interactions [characterised] by a sense of competence, commitment, equality, positive communication, respect, and trust’ (Summers et al., 2005, p. 3). Bidmead & Cowley (2005) provide a definition of



partnership as being a respectful and negotiated way of working together that enables choice, participation and equity within an honest, trusting relationship that is based on empathy, support and reciprocity (p. 208); while Deslandes (2001) has a view of partnership that is based on ‘mutual trust, common goals and two way communication’ (p. 12). Deslandes’ view is mirrored by Ashton & Cairney (2001), who propose that partnerships have at their foundation trust, mutual regard, care and a sharing and recognition of diversity and beliefs (p. 146). More locally, a recent Australian study presented a view of partnerships as being a ‘social practice achieved through and characterised by trust, mutuality and reciprocity’ (Kruger et al., 2009, p. 16).

While there are synergies across the literature in identifying the characteristics of a partnership, the characteristic of trust is the most highly ranked, followed by mutual respect, open communication and honesty (Dunst et al., 1994, cited in Keen, 2007, p. 370). However, that sense of mutuality is most common in the literature defining partnerships. In a partnership framework, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘mutuality’ may appear to be interchangeable terms, but mutuality assumes a common regard or understanding on the part of both parties; while reciprocity on the other hand suggests an interdependence of the shared understanding in that the ‘knowing’ is a two-way process both causal and influencing the interactions between the partners, creating the common regard. Deslandes (2001) spoke of a reciprocal partnership model in which there is a reconciling of all points of view and a search for consensus between the partners, recognising that each party has a particular knowledge and expertise to share. Kalyanpur & Harry (1997) build this further by arguing that not only is reciprocity about recognising that each party has a unique body of particular knowledge and

expertise, but that they have a self-awareness that enables them to they learn from one another.

Equality has also been identified across of the literature as a partnership characteristic, which represents a sense of both parties being equal in the decision making, and in appreciating the expertise of the parents as informing this decision making (Alasuutari, 2010; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Summers et al., 2005). While not included across all the literature, the term equality has synergies with other terms used widely across the literature and could be argued to be implicit, because it reflects a notion of mutuality and reciprocity, recognising and valuing the expertise each party holds, and acknowledging that this expertise might be varied and different, but in no way lesser or less significant.

### **3.3 Partnerships in education**

There is consensus across the literature that common elements exist in successful partnerships. Goos et al. (2007) suggest that successful partnerships involve

sustained, mutual collaboration, support, participation of school staff and families... in activities and efforts that have a positive effect on the academic success of children in the school' (p. 8).

While Driessen et al. (2005) present partnerships

as the process in which those involved mutually support each other and attune their contributions with the objective of promoting the learning, motivation and development of pupils (p. 510).

Fitzgerald (2004) sees partnerships in education as being about

the process in which those involved mutually support each other and attune their contributions with the objective of promoting the learning, motivation and development of pupils' (p. 1).

Douglass (2011) identifies partnerships with families occurring when there is shared power, responsiveness, reciprocity, positiveness and sensitivity, in keeping with Epstein (2011), who identifies a partnership as having shared responsibilities. Fler (1996) argued that in partnerships parents should be seen as equals in their child's education, in keeping with the view of Cavanagh & Romanoski (2005), that commitment and responsibility for the child's learning should be shared between parents teachers, and the child and should be undertaken in a framework of trust, respect and agreement.

Bastiani (cited in Fyelling & Sandvin, 1999, p. 145) suggests that partnerships between parents and teachers should reflect relationships in which there is a sharing of power, responsibility and ownership, a degree of mutuality shared aims and goals and a commitment to joint action (Bastani, cited in Fyelling & Sandvin, 1999, p. 145) Even prior to the definition presented by Bastiani in 1993, Wolfendale (1985, cited in Todd, 2007) provides a definition of partnerships with parents. He sees partnerships as occurring when parents are active and central in decision making, are perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise, share responsibility, have mutual accountability and contribute to, as well as receive, services (p. 64).

While the literature discussing partnerships in education tends to align with a more generalist understanding of partnerships as a construct, literature that discusses parent involvement (rather than parent partnership) tends to present a view of the relationship

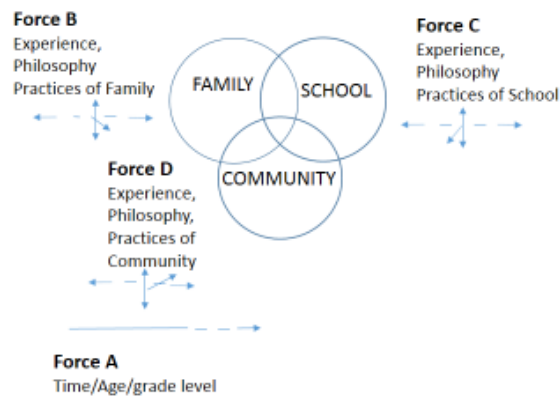
as being somewhat one sided, with much less emphasis on mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision making. Karila & Alasuutari (2012) suggest discussion of parent partnerships in the literature usually focuses on how to involve all parents in their child's education, rather than on describing the relationship within the context of reciprocity (p. 17).

Across the literature, parent involvement in education and schooling has been described as occurring when parents are active in the school through volunteer activities in the classroom or in school governance, help with homework and attend school-based events and parent-teacher communication (Ashton, & Cairney, 2001; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001; García Coll et al., 2012; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parent involvement has also been used to describe the extent to which parents are involved at home in their children's learning, through active support and involvement in children's homework reading to and with children, discussions about school and learning (Epstein, 2011; Patrikakou et al., 2005). Much of the literature on parental involvement has taken a 'school centric' notion of parent involvement (Ashton, & Cairney, 2001; Driessen et al., 2005; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Lawson, 2003). In many studies the parameters for defining what parent involvement looks like has been taken from a perspective of *schools or teachers*, because the schools and the teachers take the lead in determining the types and levels of parental involvement activities (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Hedges & Lee, 2010). In each of these examples of parent involvement, the notion of mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision making central to a notion of partnership are notably absent. The study undertaken by Berthelsen & Walker (2008) looks at parents' description of their involvement in

schools, and reports visiting classrooms and participating in excursions (p. 35) – opportunities which were led by the teacher, rather than in collaboration with families in seeking their interests. Berthelsen & Walker suggest that a critical factor in determining parents' involvement in their child's schooling involves teachers' beliefs about parents' role in the classroom and their responsibility to provide involvement opportunities to parents. However, they suggest that offering activities for parents to become involved without creating strong partnerships between schools and parents is unlikely to yield increased parental participation (p. 36).

Simon and Epstein (2001) agree that there is much confusion regarding the meaning of parent involvement, and present a framework to describe the broad interactions and collaborations that take place between families and schools in enhancing student outcomes (p. 2). They describe this framework as the 'overlapping spheres of influence' of shared responsibilities between schools, families and communities (see Figure 1).

This model encompasses the notion that children's outcomes are improved when families, schools and communities work in collaboration, with shared goals, and acknowledges that while not all school-based activities involve families and the community, there is often an overlap between the roles and responsibilities. The degree of overlap is controlled by the forces of time, experience in families and experience in schools, and how many activities that are shared are shaped by the perspectives and actions of the school, the family and the community (Epstein, 2011 Simon & Epstein, 2001).



Adapted from Epstein, 2011, p. 32.

**Figure 1 Overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community of children's learning (external structure of theoretical model)**

These spheres are pulled closer or further apart as circumstances and conditions change. In order to make sense of the form and breadth of activities identified as parent partnerships, Epstein created a framework for discussing and examining parent-school partnerships (Figure 2), which identifies six types of involvement to define the various ways parents participate and are involved in their children's schooling (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fields-Smith & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The framework:

identifies broad, separable categories of practice that involve parents, teachers, students and the community partnerships of practice in different locations and for different purposes, all contributing to students' learning and success' (Epstein, 2011, p. 46).

These six levels are presented as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community.

- **Epstein's Six types of involvement (Epstein, 2011, p 46)**
  - *Type 1: Parenting* – helping families understand child and adolescent development and establishing home environments that support children as students
  - *Type 2 Communicating* – designing and conducting effective forms of two – way communication about school programs and children's progress
  - *Type 3: Volunteering* – recruiting and organising help and support at school, home, or other locations to support the school or students' activities
  - *Type 4: Learning at Home* – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and curriculum-related decisions
  - *Type 5: Decision Making* - having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and obtaining input from all parents on school decisions
  - *Type 6: Collaborating with the community* – identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students and their families, and organising activities to benefit the

Adapted from Epstein, 2011, p. 46.

### **Figure 2 Epstein's six types of involvement**

This list positions parent involvement along a continuum when looked at from a framework of partnership. At the first level, parenting schools work in helping families to understand child development and how to establish responsive home environments. Levels 5 and 6 are about collaboration and decision making when parents and schools work together. The notion of partnerships or parent involvement in schools being presented as a series of levels is also supported by Robson (2006), who argues that the dimensions of relationships can be characterised by minimal personal contact at one end and ideas of partnerships and reciprocal relationships at the other (p. 444). Tayler (2006) also theorises partnerships as occurring along a continuum, building on Epstein's framework to describe partnerships as beginning with passive support and moving to active participatory decision making (p. 250).

### **3.4 What does partnership look like in early childhood education?**

Relationships between parents and professionals, of all kinds, play a more prominent role during the period of early childhood than at possibly any other time in a child's life (Robson, 2006, p. 443).

With increasing numbers of children spending large amounts of time in formalised Australian ECE&C settings, the importance of establishing strong connections with families is becoming increasingly important. In 2011 nearly two million children aged between birth and twelve years attended some form of child care programs. The highest level of overall care attendance was among two and three year olds, of whom 54% usually attended formal care; however, almost 37% of children aged twelve months also attended formal child care (ABS, 2010). The time that children spend in long day care settings now averages approximately twenty-six hours per week (DEEWR, 2010).

As more young children are cared for outside their homes, the notion that parents should be involved in children's child care settings has gained popularity (Zellman & Perlman, 2006, p. 521).

Parent involvement in the early childhood programs have been linked with high quality service provision (Cantin et al., 2012; Douglass, 2011; Elliott, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004). Effective partnerships between families and early years settings contribute to a more positive attitude about the setting and create a stronger connection for the young children, who are likely to see less of a divide between home and the early years setting if families and practitioners value and respect one another (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 11). In their 2006 study, Zellman & Perlman found that that parent-provider communication is associated with higher quality care for both individual children and the children as a whole (p. 526). Their study found that more communication about the child between



educators and the parents was associated with more sensitive caregiver–child interactions. In Finland the national curriculum for early childhood presents partnerships as relationships that draw on and recognise shared knowledge and expertise from both parents and educators. Partnership is:

a continuous commitment by parents and staff to collaboration for supporting children’s growth, development and learning... Parents have the primary right to and responsibility for their child’s education and also know their child well (and staff, in turn, drawing on their professional knowledge and competence (STAKE, 2004, p. 28).

The Finnish document acknowledges the need for mutual trust, respect and equality (Sosiaali- ja Terveystieteiden tutkimus- ja Kehittämiskeskus, 2004). This notion in the Finnish early childhood curriculum is mirrored in both the EYLF and the VEYLDF. In a recent study into parent–caregiver relationships, Cantin and colleagues identified three main indicators of a successful relationship between parents and caregivers: confidence, collaboration and affiliation. However, they also recognise the importance of examining the relationships at a dyadic level (Cantin et al., 2012), an approach not taken in the literature. They argue that studies focusing on a more generalised discussion on the interactions between parents and educators may miss the variations that are specific to a particular educator and a particular parent. The nature of the early childhood environment in a long day care setting is that educators interact with a range of parents and parents will interact with several different educators (p. 266). A study by Swick in 2004 (cited in Cantin et al., 2012, p. 266) identifies that while one teacher was described as warm and very helpful by one parent, this same teacher was also described as distant and hard to work with by another parent.

The broader research outlines the nature of parent partnerships as being teacher led, and follows a more one-sided notion of parent involvement, rather than parent partnership. The literature also focuses more on the early childhood context. Ihmeideh (2008) suggests that there are different ways to involve parents in developing their children's learning, including participating in activities in the kindergarten, following up at home the activities children have been involved in and showing awareness of the kindergarten program (p. 163). Driessen and colleagues found that parents were mostly involved by helping with events and general jobs that needed undertaking whether they were informal or formal events (Driessen et al., 2005). The activities parents are most likely to be involved in include attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering and helping in the classroom, using resources offered by the program, fundraising, planning and participating in social events, and assisting with maintenance (Billman et al., 2005; Foot et al., 2002; Hilado et al., 2011; McGrath, 2007). In each of these studies the opportunities for involvement are dictated and driven by teachers, offering a range of activities to become *involved* but not encapsulating a sense of partnership. There is no sense of mutuality or reciprocity which underpins the notion of partnership.

A key aspect of partnerships is that of shared decision making. Fields-Smith & Neuharth-Pritchett (2009) argue that in early childhood settings, it is often difficult for families to take up a role as decision maker because often meetings and other opportunities are scheduled at a time when parents cannot attend. Fields-Smith & Neuharth-Pritchett also suggest that centres lack the mechanisms for families to be included as decision makers, particularly when this might relate to governance or management issues. This is of particular relevance to the ECE&C sector in Australia,

where half of all long day care services are privately owned and operated, rather than community managed (Productivity Commission, 2011). Foot et al. (2002) found that parents from privately owned centres reported little opportunity for parental participation in daily activities and with administration. They also experienced less encouragement from staff to participate, although there was still a significant proportion who wished to participate in some way (p. 16). McGrath (2007) also argues that if a partnership is based on an essence of collaboration, then such collaboration is difficult to achieve because many working parents do not have the time to participate in their children's programs (p. 1403).

Douglass & Gittell (2012) argue that the creation and nurturing of relationships with families in early childhood may be 'the weakest component of the movement toward quality child care' (p. 270), finding there is often a gap between centre philosophy regarding relationships with families and actual practice. McGrath argues that the whole notion of partnership in a long day care context is vulnerable when families cannot become involved (2007, p. 1403). Foot et al. argue that the extent and quality of parental involvement in early childhood settings is 'inevitably harnessed to, and shaped by, institutional policy' (2002, p. 7).

This chapter introduces the literature that outlines the value for children, families and educators of forming partnerships with families that engage them in their child's learning. It presents a theoretical framework to build understanding of what partnership might look like in an education context. However, several studies show that how teachers and parents view these partnerships do not always align. The next chapter

further explores this body of literature regarding partnerships in education from the two differing perspectives of teachers and parents.

## **Chapter 4 Partnerships from different perspectives – looking at the views of teachers and parents**

Exactly what parent–educator partnerships look like, and can be defined as, in an education context is somewhat problematic, and this becomes more complex when examining the perspectives from which the relationship is defined. The literature shows the often differing perspectives on the relationship when examined from the viewpoint of the teacher or a parent. This chapter builds on the discussion of partnerships within the context of education by further exploring the literature regarding partnership in education from two differing viewpoints: those of teachers and the parents.

### **4.1 The nature of the partnerships between teachers and parents – the teacher perspective**

Fields-Smith & Neuharth-Pturchett (2009) identify that there are often differing perspectives on the nature of the partnerships between teachers and families. Different perspectives are often presented by teachers, depending on the relationship the teacher has with the parents. Keyes (2002) suggests that teachers will sometimes have good feelings of shared efforts and mutually valued achievement with some parents; while with others there is a sense of frustration, helplessness or even anger over conflicting perceptions and understandings (p. 179).

In their 2010 study, Hedges & Lee suggest that teachers had higher estimates of parental involvement in early childhood education than did the parents (2010, p. 258).

In keeping with the notion of school-centric parent involvement (Ashton & Cairney,

2001; Lawson, 2003; Driessen et al., 2005; Knopf & Swick, 2007), much of the literature on parent involvement, as presented from the perspectives of the teacher, tends to equate parent involvement and the quality of the parent partnership as a result of the parents' capacity to meet the needs and expectations of the school and the teachers (Keyes, 2002; Lawson, 2003).

Teachers have been known to equate lack of parent involvement with lack of interest (Lee & Bowen, 2006), which can then lead to a feeling of being unappreciated and undervalued (Grossman, 1999; Keyes, 2002; McGrath, 2007) and unsupported in their role – as if there is a belief that when parents are not willing to be involved, children's' achievements will suffer (Lawson, 2003). Teachers may at times perceive a conflict between themselves and the parents, with one parent in the Lawson study stating:

I think that sometimes there's a hidden conflict between parents and teachers where, you know, teachers feel that they should be getting more support from the parents, and the parents feel that the teachers should be doing more with the child (2003, p. 111).

The McGrath study identifies that teachers perceived parents as having a stronger voice in the centre, because they had a direct voice to the centre director. This led to further levels of distrust when the early childhood educator did not have a positive relationship or in turn was had little trust in the centre director (2007, p. 1411).

Teachers in a study by Hujala et al. (2009) saw their role with parents largely as one of building parenting skills, a notion that Reedy & McGrath (2010) report was a prevalent understanding of the role for including parents in the program during the latter part of the 20th century, while others felt that parent involvement required attendance at parent

conferences or meetings, reading take-home information, spending time on home learning activities and volunteering at school (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Lawson, 2003; Shumow & Harris, 2000). Tayler (2006) also reports that teachers' views of partnerships reflect what might more commonly be described as parent involvement which teachers providing information about the program activities, fostering parents' understanding of child development and 'ensuring transmission of the (centre) agenda at home' (p. 250). However, she does note that teachers see themselves as collaborating with parents to build joint understanding about the child. When it comes to matters around decision making and shared contributions to curriculum, while parents are often invited to help in classrooms and supervise homework using the traditional discourses of the school, they are invited to share dialogue about their children's strengths and interests far less frequently (Ashton & Cairney, 2001). Other studies show that the teacher will often feel threatened by parents wanting to be involved in curriculum decisions, and do not consider parents as equal partners in this process (Billman et al., 2005; Hedges, 2002; McGrath, 2007). In fact, it has been reported that teachers consider engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge (Sewell, 2012).

Teachers' beliefs, backgrounds, attitudes and practices play key roles in determining the extent to which they create partnerships with families, in teachers' expectations of families, and how families will engage in a partnership (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Grossman, 1999; Hedges & Lee, 2010; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Of particular impact on the quality of the partnership is the way teachers view the role of parents as partners, or as them being participants in the

program. Teachers who see the value of engaging parents as partners in their child's learning and who see parents as capable partners are more likely to have parents engaged in the learning of their child (Baum & Swick, 2008). Shumow and Harris found that some teachers did not view the parents as having any skills or knowledge at all (2000, p. 16), which created expectations and assumptions about the capacity of the parent to be an involved partner. Teachers usually work in isolation from other teachers, although schools may employ large teaching teams, and teachers who are used to working autonomously without these positive dispositions may not find it easy to involve parents, except under close supervision (Foot et al., 2002, p. 7). Grossman (1999) spoke of teachers as perhaps having developed prejudices and biases about some families, particularly if they come from different backgrounds or life experiences (p. 25), and this argument is supported by Souto-Manning & Swick (2006), who found this to be particularly so when the diverse experiences of families in the education setting are unfamiliar to teachers. If parents and families are viewed negatively by teachers and as not being capable of developing partnerships, the teachers are less likely to create and foster opportunities to develop these partnerships. However, it has also been argued that teacher practices, rather than the background of the family, determine the levels of involvement parents engage in (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Baum & Swick, 2008; Xu & Gulosino, 2006).

Teacher self-efficacy, and the way they view themselves, also play roles in determining the extent of and commitment to parent partnerships (Foot, 2002; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Hadley, 2012). Teachers who are secure in their own professional identity are more likely to welcome input from



parents; those who feel less secure can feel threatened, and in turn try and reinstate their professional status and position as the ‘more knowledgeable expert’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Peña, 2000; Foot et al., 2002; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Hadley, 2012).

#### **4.2 The nature of the partnerships between teachers and parents – the parent perspective**

A sense of ambiguity emerges when reading the literature from the perspective of the parents, and there is often a disconnect between what teachers believe and how they view parent partnership and the views and beliefs of parents themselves (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Foot et al., 2002; Hedges & Lee, 2010; Keyes, 2002; MacNaughton, 2004). This can lead to a strain in the relationships (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Pena, 2000), because this disconnect is often a result of having different expectations of what the partnership looks like and what the partnership would ideally involve (McGrath, 2007). While teachers examine the role parents might undertake in response to the way they are physically active and involved in their child’s learning – using measures such as contribute to homework, volunteer in the classroom and attend parent–teacher conferences – the parent perspective presents a different view. Parents tend to measure the partnership they have with teachers more from an aspect of communication and the quality of the interpersonal as well as the range and extent of opportunities they feel they are afforded to become involved and opportunities for sharing information about the child (Cantin et al., 2012; Foot et al., 2002; Hadley, 2012; Hedges & Lee, 2010; Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Lawson, 2003; McGrath, 2007).

The quality of the interpersonal communication between the teacher and the parent is a strong indicator of how a parent assesses the quality of the partnership, and is valued more highly than the structured, planned events that teachers make available for parents (Hedges & Lee, 2010). Here, parents views are somewhat ambiguous. Drugli & Undheim (2011) found that most parents reported that the partnership they had with caregivers was satisfactory, although they did not know much about what happened in daily activities (p. 52). However, Cantin et al. argue that while parents generally report being satisfied with their interactions with caregivers, the caregivers would like more frequent communication with parents (2012, p. 267). Hadley (2012) reports that while the educators consistently rated communication as satisfactory, the families rated the communication as poor (p. 46), because parents are seeking communication that is ‘informal, positive, open and friendly’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2003, p. 230). Parents rated the communication as successful when there was a two-way sharing of information between the parent and the educators (Reedy & McGrath, 2010), and the information shared by the educator is congruent to what they themselves believe about their child (McGrath, 2007). Parents often perceive the communication to be one-sided, with the teachers driving the communication and parents not having the opportunities to share their own issues or knowledge (Elliot, 2003). There was also a belief by parents that educators need to be more responsive to parental voices and concerns (Lawson, 2003).

Keyes (2002) spoke about the importance of the ‘fit’ between parental concerns and those of the teacher in influencing the success of the partnership, stating that

there are good feelings of shared efforts and mutually valued achievement with some parents, while with others there is a sense of frustration, helplessness or even anger over conflicting perceptions and understandings (p. 179).

The attitudes and behaviours of the educators are also an important influence on how the parents perceive the success of their involvement in the centre and the nature of their subsequent involvement (Robson, 2006). Parents who have negative experiences are less likely to become involved in the early childhood program (Swick, 2004). In contrast, some parents in the Robson study spoke of the educators as being part of their 'family' and of there being a 'friendship' between themselves and the educators (2006, p. 456). A recent study by Page (2011) identified that the mothers in her study wanted to feel that the educators 'loved' their children, extending the notion of family.

The capacity to form trusting relationships is also of key importance for families, and unlike in other relationships, trust needs to be immediate (McGrath, 2007). This is especially so for the early childhood context, where parents leave their child with someone whom they need to trust from the outset will provide appropriate to care and nurturing relationships. Fundamental in the relationship between the parent and the educator is an understanding and a trust that the teacher knows their child and, more importantly, likes their child (Loughran, 2008, p. 38). Parents also need to feel valued and have a sense that they are needed (Swick, 2004) and that the educators are genuine and authentic (Robson, 2006). The development of trust is compromised when parents sense that the communication is strained or when there is a difference of opinion between the parent and the educator (McGrath, 2007).

While a majority of parents felt that they should show a willingness to participate in their child's early years program, many feel that they do not know how to, or that they did not have the opportunity (Foot et al., 2002; Martin, 2006; O'Brien, 2011). The parents' desires to become involved stems from a need to find out more about their child's activities and daily routines, information about their child's progress and concern for their child's wellbeing (Elliot, 2003). However, a perceived lack of encouragement or invitation, domestic or work commitments, family commitments, and psychological wellbeing will often preclude families from actively becoming involved (Foot et al., 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003; Martin, 2006). Hornby & Lafaele also identified that some families lacked confidence in their own competence to successfully assist (2011, p. 40).

The *National Reform Agenda* highlights the role that parents play as decision makers and as being authorities in their child's unique learning. This image of parents as being decision makers and experts in knowing and understanding their child from their own unique perspective is a recent change in concept from a more traditional view of the teacher being the expert and the parent seeking to gain knowledge of child development and parenting, which had been the previous focus of parent relationships (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2003; McGrath, 2007). However, many parents still view educators as the definitive experts in developing appropriate programs for their children (Vogel, as cited in Driessen et al., 2005, Tayler, 2006). Teachers are often reluctant to engage families in partnerships that are based on shared decision making, and recognise parents as having expert knowledge. Parent knowledge is still being viewed as supplementary to that of teachers (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). This can

lead to tensions between educators and parents when the parent feels that their own knowledge and expertise is not being respected or acknowledged (Hadley, 2012; Peña, 2000). Parents are still reporting that the ways they are invited to become involved in their child's education is being determined by the school, and usually involves being involved in activities and events such as helping in the classroom or on excursions or in roles defined by the school (Doucet, 2008; Foot et al., 2002; Lawson, 2003). They also see themselves as not having a voice in how they are able to contribute and share their own expertise, with a view that teachers see themselves as the experts and so their own views are largely ignored (Peña, 2000; Lawson, 2003; Doucett, 2008). While one perspective of teachers is that they feel threatened by parents when they elect to be involved in decision making, the parents see this as an occasion to give them access to additional information about their child's progress and not as a monitoring of educator practice (Foot et al., 2002). The educators misunderstand the nature of the interests that the parents identify, which is that access to the setting actually enriches their sense of their child's educational progress.

This analysis of the literature from the contrasting perspectives of teachers and parents provides an insight into the complexity of the relationships that exist between parents and educators.

At this point, an introduction to FCP, and a discussion of where it sits within an understanding of partnership defined by multiple perspectives and differing terminology, is warranted. The following chapter explores the literature framing FCP from both a historical and a theoretical perspective, exploring what defines FCP and

how FCP came into being as a concept for creating partnerships between parents and educators.

## Chapter 5 Family-centred practice

While partnership as a broad concept has been included in the policy documents for ECE&C, in Victoria the VEYLDF specifically states that all educators, practitioners and professionals working with families and young children will do so using FCP. In the VEYLDF document FCP is described as ‘respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives’ and in which early childhood professionals:

- use families’ understanding of their children to support shared decision making about each child’s learning and development
- create a welcoming and culturally inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to children’s learning and development experiences
- actively engage families and children in planning children’s learning and development
- provide feedback to families on their children’s learning and information about how families can further advance children’s learning and development at home and in the community (DEECD, 2009, p. 10).

While a policy definition of FCP is outlined in the VEYLDF, this does not provide a clear understanding for educators of the underlying philosophy and core principles of FCP in which to position the interactions they have with families. This chapter introduces the reader to FCP by examining its origins, the key underpinning philosophy

and characteristics and explores FCP from a theoretical context as it sits within a broader partnership framework.

## **5.1 A historical overview**

The genesis of FCP can be found in the movement away from a medical model of service provision to children with disabilities and health needs to a social model of intervention. This model identifies the influence and context of family in the life of a child with a disability, and came to the fore in the mid-1960s through work undertaken in the United States by the Association for the Care of Children in Hospital (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Law, 1998). This association recognises the importance of responding to family needs and preferences in the medical intervention and care of children with complex medical and developmental care needs. Until this time service provision for children with complex needs had been largely child centred and treatment focused, where decision making as to what was considered the best interventions for the child was undertaken by the individual practitioners (Keen, 2007; Law, 1998). The change in focus led to a more social model of service provision that became more family centred, which identified and acknowledged the influence and context of the family in the life of a child with a disability (Patterson & Hovey, 2000). This shift in focus came about in the main as a response to legislation in the United States that outlined the crucial role of families in the care of children with a disability. This change in focus resulted in a move away from the institutionalised care of children with disabilities and complex medical needs into an approach that supported these children being cared for in the home (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Law, 1998). The development of family-centred approaches to care and intervention led to service providers being



legislated to develop individual plans with the families that outlined the care and education programs for the children (Allen & Petr, 1998; Craft-Rosenberg et al., 2006; Murray & Mandell, 2006).

Alongside the shift that was occurring in the medical and disability arenas, the emergence of family support programs in the social welfare sector, and the Head Start initiative<sup>4</sup> also acknowledges the significant role of families as central to the health and welfare of children. In the development of programs and resources for vulnerable families, an approach was adopted that viewed the family within a systemic context approach, recognising that the actions affecting any one member of the family affect all of the members of the family. Similarly, family-centred approaches to care and intervention were also adopted by the mental health field in the United States as a practice principle for that sector (Johnson et al., 2003).

In Australia the implementation of FCP has been a core practice principle for early childhood intervention practitioners since the early 1990s, in response to the research and literature advocating the benefits for both children and families of this practice approach (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Bruder, 2000). Of most significance to the adoption of this model in Australia was the work of Carl Dunst and colleagues in the late 1980s (Dunst et al., 1988; Dunst, 1985), who present a discussion on the rethinking of family intervention practice to view families within a ‘social systems’ perspective. This view of family intervention practice moved away from viewing the child as the sole focus of intervention to seeing the family as the unit for intervention (Dunst et al.,

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<sup>4</sup> Head Start is a federal program across the US that promotes the school readiness of children ages birth to five years from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/head-start>, viewed 30 January 2014).

1988, p. 5). The approach outlined by Dunst creates a model for practitioners that places families at the heart of decisions made for their children with complex health and medical needs. This focus enables the families to become empowered in this decision making.

## **5.2 Theoretical perspective**

Three basic premises underpin FCP:

- parents know their children and want the best for their children
- families are different and unique
- optimal child functioning occurs within a supportive family and community context (Law, 1998).

The major goal of FCP is to support families in their caregiving and parenting roles by building on their unique and individual strengths, within a strengths-based approach that promotes family choice over desired resources within a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals.

Family-centred early intervention has its theoretical basis in both Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and Bowen's family systems theory (Dunst et al., 1988; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Özdemir, 2007). Family-centred practice recognises as core the notion that children exist within a wider context of family, community and society and that:

every level of the ecological system is interconnected and thus influence all other subsystems... [and] helps explain the mechanisms through which children and their families are influenced (Weiss et al., 2005).

FCP is a philosophy of partnership that acknowledges and respects the pivotal role that the family plays in the lives of children (Brown et al., 1993) and the primacy of the parent–professional relationship. In this relationship decision making and planning around mutually agreed goals are shared between parents and professionals who engage in a relationship defined mutual respect, trust and honesty (Keen, 2007 in Dempsey et al., 2009, p. 42).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework presents a model through which to examine the ecology of human development by acknowledging that humans do not develop in isolation, but in relation to their family and home, school, community and society. Each of these ever-changing and multilevel environments, as well as interactions among these environments, are seen to be key to development. What matters for behaviour and development is the environment as it is *perceived* rather than as it may exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 4). This reinforces a constructivist view that reality is an individual perception. The basic tenet of this model lies in the belief that the world of the child consists of five systems of interaction: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Each system depends on the contextual nature of the person’s life and offers an ever-growing diversity of options and sources of growth (Swick & Williams, 2006, p. 371). Each member of the system, and their relationships, are in turn influenced by the broader social, political and educational policies. This broader system (mesosystem) shapes the perceptions, expectations and equality of the relationships that exist between the nested systems (Odom et al., 2004), and as such, creates the ‘reality’ as it is perceived by the individual. Bronfenbrenner saw these systems as an interconnecting network of influences on the child and the surrounding

environment (Özdemir, 2007). As well as focusing on the child's and parent's immediate environment and their face-to-face interactions, of equal importance in this model is the notion of the child and family's quality of life as being affected by the other three levels (Turnbull & Blue-Banning, 1999). Swick and colleagues also argue that this model is also based on the idea of empowering families through understanding their strengths and needs (Swick & Williams, 2006).

Family systems theory is a theory of human behaviour that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit.

Systems theory assumes that all important people in the family unit play a part in the way family members function in relation to each other (Bowen, 1974, p. 115).

Family systems theory recognises the interconnectedness and interrelationships of the individuals that collectively determine the family group and forms the basis of family intervention and assessment (Brown et al., 1993; Keen, 2007; Law, 1998; Minuchin, 1974; Özdemir, 2007), and acknowledges that families are an ever-growing and ever-changing system which have their own structure, resources and interactional patterns (Özdemir, 2007, p. 18). This theoretical perspective of family relationships provides a conceptual framework for understanding family functioning, and contextualises families as operating as a social system by defining family as a group of interconnected and interrelated individuals operating within a social system that is open, ongoing, goal seeking, and self-regulating, but is set apart from other social systems in that it is unique and shaped by its own particular structural features, psychobiological characteristics of its individual members and its socio-cultural position within a larger

environment (Broderick, 1993, p. 37). Family systems theory acknowledges that as a system, actions affecting any one member affect all of the members (Brown et al., 1993; Cox & Van Velsor, 2000; Keen, 2007; Law, 1998; Minuchin, 1974).

FCP is grounded in an understanding that children exist in the context of their families, and that what affects one member of the family will impact on the human behaviour and emotional functioning at multiple levels (Bregman & White, 2011, p. 1), a combination of these two theoretical approaches. FCP also acknowledges that as a system, all families possess certain strengths. These strengths need to be acknowledged, and form the basis of the relationship. Building on these strengths, families should be empowered in being an active and equal partner in the decision making for their child (Brewer et al., 1989; Bruder, 2000).

The core principles of FCP are enacted by relationships and interactions characterised as being culturally sensitive, inclusive and reciprocal, recognising and respecting one another's knowledge and expertise, and allowing for informed family choice. There is a sharing of unbiased and complete information by practitioners, and parent involvement is meaningful, individualised, flexible, coordinated and responsive (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Craft-Rosenberg et al., 2006; Epley et al., 2010; Hanna & Rodger, 2002; Johnson, 2000; Keyser, 2006; Wright et al., 2010). These characteristics are inherent in the behaviours of the practitioners in the interactional relationships that are formed with families – and also in the way families are enabled to participate in this partnership and decision-making process. This distinction between relational and participatory behaviours is fundamental to FCP (Dunst, 2002; Dunst, & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst, Trivette & Hamby, 2007; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Relational practices are those

interpersonal behaviours that govern the interactions between the ‘help giver’ and the ‘help seeker’, behaviours such as empathy, active listening and being non-judgemental and the crafting of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships (Barrera & Corso, 2002). The terms ‘help giver’ and ‘help seeker’ feature prominently in the literature relating to FCP. As recently as 2010 Dunst (2010) spoke of professionals as the ‘help givers’, enabling and empowering ‘help seekers’ (families) to actively participate in the decision-making process, building on early studies where these terms were used in describing the role of professionals in working with families, positioning professionals in a role of expert (Davis, H, Day & Bidmead, 2002; Dempsey & Dunst, 2004; Dunst, C, Trivette & Deal, 1988; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). Davis, Day and Bidmead (2002) also use these terms in discussing the relationship between families and professionals in working together in family-centred interventions. Participatory behaviours are presented as practices such as those that enable families to be actively involved in the decision-making process. Families should be provided with opportunities to discuss options, where these options are valued and acknowledged in the decision making, and this practice should recognise the centrality of the family, because it is the family and not the professional, who is responsible for deciding what is done for the child (Tomasello et al., 2010). Coming from a strengths-based perspective (Brewer et al., 1989; Bruder, 2000), the staff member understands that parents know their child better than anyone else, and are capable contributors. The reciprocal nature of FCP invites the participation of families in enhancing the learning that practitioners gain from the expertise held by the parents on the uniqueness of their child. While both participatory as well as relational behaviours will be present in the practice of the practitioner for FCP to be effectively enacted, the latter component – the participatory behaviour – is

seen as being essential in the enactment of FCP, and this sets it apart from a wider construct of partnership (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Participatory practices also include the family as active participants in meeting desired outcomes and strengthening existing competencies.

In order for families to become key agents in decision making, not only do the participatory behaviours of the professional need to be present, but core to FCP is the philosophy that emphasises that parents are empowered as active participants in this decision-making process. While this chapter introduces a historical and theoretical understanding of FPC, central to the philosophy is the notion of the family as being pivotal in the lives of children, and as such should be empowered decision makers for their children (Allen & Petr, 1998; Brewer et al., 1989; Brown et al., 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Raghavendra et al., 2007; Trivette et al., 1995). The following section engages with the notion of empowerment by exploring the literature surrounding this concept.

### **5.3 Empowerment as a component of family-centred practice**

Sitting alongside family systems theory and ecology theory as underpinning FCP is the notion of empowerment, which is integral to this model of partnership. Within a social systems perspective, empowerment recognises that families are already competent, and that the social system prevents competence being displayed (Dunst et al., 1988; Swick & Williams, 2006). That families are empowered decision makers is key to the philosophy of FCP. This chapter presents a discussion on empowerment by examining the theoretical perspectives that underpin the concept, and then explores empowerment as it relates to the early childhood sector, examining the capacity of the sector to

empower effectively families as key decision makers. This literature review investigates the principle of empowerment within a social systems context, examining the socio-cultural influences that contribute to the behaviours and actions of both families and practitioners

As empowered and positive partners and shared decision makers, families are core to the philosophy underpinning FCP as noted at the end of the last chapter. Within this context, empowerment has been described as occurring when an individual has access to and control over needed resources, decision-making and problem-solving abilities, and has acquired the behaviour needed to interact effectively with others to procure resources, which include communication skills, energy and persistence (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Empowerment is reciprocal by definition and in nature, and is used as a framework for intervention in describing the ‘help giver’ and ‘help seeker’ relationship. Focusing on the decision-making and problem-solving abilities of the help seeker, the notion of empowerment enables the help seeker to gain access and control over their own needs and the acquisition of essential behaviours to interact effectively in ensuring the required resources are sourced (Dunst et al., 1988). Once empowered, the help seeker is then enabled to take control of the actions necessary to have their needs met. Their capacity to do this is directly influenced by the enabling and empowering behaviour of the help giver (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007).

### **5.1 Empowerment as a construct**

The term ‘empowerment’ is widely used across a range of human services disciplines as a desirable outcome of service practice (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997, p. 287), and can be defined as a process whereby



families access knowledge, skills and resources that enable them to gain positive control of their lives as well as improve the quality of their life-styles (Singh, 1995, p. 13).

Empowerment has also been defined as ‘the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours associated with perceptions of control, competence, and confidence’ (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 306) and having resources and legal rights to be able to effectively negotiate with societal institutions (Dokecki, 1983, p. 119). Cummins (1995) defines empowerment as ‘the collective creation of power’ (p. 209); while Thompson et al. (1997) present a view similar to that of Turnbull and Turnbull of empowerment as being a construct that involves individuals in determining their own future.

Empowerment is where individuals are confident they have the information and problem-solving skills necessary to deal with challenging situations. The authors believe it is the role of professionals to empower parents by sharing information and engaging them as partners in shared decision making (p. 100).

Empowerment theory assumes that all people have strengths and capabilities, as well as the capacity to become more competent (Boehm & Staples, 2004; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Rappaport, 1981). When applied to relationships between parents and professionals, empowerment emphasises the enhancement and strengthening of family functioning. Empowerment theory suggests that empowerment can be viewed as both a process and an outcome (Boehm & Staples, 2004). The process of empowerment is the ‘mechanism by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their affairs’ (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122), and increasing ‘personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations’ (Gutierrez, 1990; 1995). The outcome relates to the consequences of the process – a measure of the

level of empowerment that has been achieved and can be assessed by examining the individual's beliefs about their own sense of control and competency – the individuals' interactions and relationship with the social environment and actions they take to exert control over the environment (Boehm & Staples, 2004; Nachshen, 2004).

Dempsey & Foreman (1997) discuss empowerment as having its origins as a psychological construct, as offered by Zimmerman (1990; 1995), and present several components that need to be present when empowered, such as having strong self-efficacy, participation and collaboration and a sense of control. The psychological construct of empowerment refers to empowerment at an individual, rather than at an organisational or community level (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

At the individual level, empowerment includes participatory behaviour, motivations to exert control, and feelings of efficacy and control (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 169).

This usually includes a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence and the ability to assertively take a role in controlling resources and decision making (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Psychological empowerment is also seen as a construct by which people gain control over their lives (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570).

A further view of empowerment can be found by examining empowerment theory through the constructivism lens. Within this context it has been argued that empowerment can mean different things to different people, as determined by their past experiences, across time and settings and the context of the specific population at the

time (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Of added relevance is the environment in which the individual or organisation operates (Soodak et al., 2002) and the internal and external contexts that create the environment. This is an important concept to consider when examining and determining an individual level of empowerment, as what one may define and attribute as empowerment or disempowerment may be a result of social, political or historical characteristics. creating a context in which different meanings and interpretations of who is an isn't empowered might be assigned. This standpoint positions an understanding of empowerment, or the empowerment context, as it may be defined by those who are in a position of leadership or empowerment. This may differ from those who are, at that particular point of time, in subservient or disempowered positions. Empowerment may be more or less valued in the cultural and societal context in which the participants exist and it is this particular context that is important to explore examining its role in creating and enabling empowerment to develop (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998).

The influences affecting a sense or belief of empowerment or disempowerment are seen to exist as a consequence of the fluctuations and dynamics of ever changing contexts. Boehm and Staples (2004) found that not only is the concept of empowerment viewed from different perspectives within different groups, but also that the professionals saw empowerment differently from the views presented by the consumers of their programs. This supports the view of empowerment as being constructed by the social, political and historical contexts, beliefs and experiences of the participants. Foster-Fishman et al. (1998) also found that those who were in positions of leadership differed in their reflections of levels and contexts of empowerment from those of the

workers, and it was the dynamic of the ever-changing context that influenced the perceptions of empowerment across their participants.

Empowerment as it applies to FCP focuses on the notion that families come to the relationship with the professionals with existing strengths and competence, however seek help from the professionals to access resources and participate in decision making. This concept has created a context in which the professionals are viewed as the ‘help givers’ and the parents as the ‘help seekers’ (Davis et al., 2002; Dunst, 2010; Nachshen, 2004), creating a view of the professionals as being empowered, and the parents as needing to be supported and ‘enabled’ to acquire a level of empowerment (Dunst et al., 1988). The ‘help giver’ and ‘help seeker’ concept implies inequality in the relationships. The professionals come from a position of empowerment as being the more knowledgeable other in the eyes of the parent, while the parents have a position of relative disempowerment and rely on the educator to provide them with the knowledge and understanding they require. They are relying on the educator’s enabling behaviours, to become active participants in determining services and resources for their child. Building on the notion of empowerment as having different meanings as determined by context, what may appear by the professionals as being enabling behaviours may be viewed very differently by families. The meanings attributed to empowerment are determined by the sense of personal self-efficacy and the socio-cultural experiences and beliefs that the families bring to the relationship with the professionals and the dynamics of the relationship in a broader socio-political environment.

In taking a constructivist stance, this balance will only exist if the professional has constructed a view of themselves that supports their own empowered stance. Kalyanpur & Harry argue that the onus for empowering parents is on the professionals, by virtue of the latter's access to information. However, empowerment can only occur if professionals have the tools for enablement; that is, they acquire specific skills to increase families' level of involvement (1997, p. 487). Robson (2006) also discusses teachers as empowering families, but posits that despite the efforts of the educators in their study to empower parents, their comments still tended to emphasise a balance of power weighted in favour of the practitioners, albeit that this seemed to be what the parents themselves wanted (p. 457).

An examination of empowerment in the education sector shows that the teacher viewed as the 'expert' is not always the case. Within a broad education context, a body of literature exists that presents a view that in many situations, teachers in fact experience levels of disempowerment as professionals (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Galen, 2005; Overton, 2009; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005). Empowerment in teachers has been linked to feelings of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, supportive leadership and a sense of professional status (Davis, & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Short, 1994). Short (1994) identifies six dimensions for examining teacher empowerment: involvement in decision making, teacher impact, teacher status, autonomy, opportunities for professional development and teacher self-efficacy (p. 489). Pearson and Moomaw (2005) identify a strong link between the autonomy in decision making that teachers feel they have and their sense of empowerment (p. 40). Another form of empowerment in teachers, as

described by Davis and Wilson (2000), centres on the degree to which an individual has a sense of personal power and motivation (p. 349). Feelings of power and motivation are linked to opportunities to engage in active and meaningful decision making and perceived levels of job satisfaction.

Empowered teachers are allowed, in fact encouraged to, share decisions about important issues (Quaglia et al., 1991, p. 208).

They need to recognise and believe that they have the power make changes (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002, p. 142). However, while Overton (2009) identifies decision making as having an influence on teacher empowerment, she found that teachers also made decisions based on their educational understandings (p. 4). Research has also presented a link between teacher satisfaction and teacher empowerment. Quaglia et al. (1991) found that satisfied and dissatisfied teachers differed in their sense of empowerment (p. 211). Teacher satisfaction is associated with teacher pay, working conditions, levels of stress, professional status and perceived capacity to adequately undertake their role as teachers (Overton, 2009; Short, 1994; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005) as well as feelings of morale and commitment and the perceived fairness of the workload (Rinehart & Short, 1994).

## **5.2 Empowerment and the ECE&C sector in Australia**

When examining empowerment as it relates to the ECE&C workforce in Australia, these discussions on teacher empowerment are particularly pertinent. Since the early part of the twenty-first century there has been considerable discussion on the dichotomy between education and care provision with young children, with education mostly being seen to be the realm of degree-trained early childhood teachers providing

services to children in the year prior to starting school, and care being seen to be the main emphasis of centre-based care services mainly sought by working parents. These care services were acknowledged as supporting children's development while providing safe and secure care, and were mainly provided for by two-year diploma level qualified staff or those with a certificate-level training. A significant number of the early childhood care workforce had no formal training at all (DEEWR, 2010). This has led to an environment where there is a professional divide between what constitutes a 'proper' teacher in ECE&C settings (MacFarlane & Lewis, 2004). The national policy is that all early childhood centres will employ a degree-qualified teacher from 2014, but there is little clarity as to the role of this teacher within the service other than in delivering programs to the children in the centre who will be moving on to school the following year.

This background provides an important context for framing the discussion on empowerment as it is enacted within the early childhood and care sector across Australia, particularly as it relates to those practitioners working in roles more traditionally associated with care provision. Since the mid-1990s child care in Australia has largely been shaped by policy that was driven by an economic need to enhance economic prosperity and support women to engage in paid employment. This led to an emergence of for-profit child care providers entering the market and access by families to financial support in meeting the costs of child care. Early childhood care and education is now constructed as a commercial venture (Goodfellow, 2005; Wong, 2007). This policy direction resulted in a sector that was characterised by low levels of qualified staff, poor pay and conditions as well as 'low funding levels, poorly defined

and fragmented notions of customer need, and weak professional advocacy' (Bretherton, 2010, p. 7), creating a climate in which child care practitioners feel undervalued. These findings mirror those of Simms (2006), whose UK study found similar levels of dissatisfaction. The literature includes a discussion on the link between job satisfaction, self-efficacy and empowerment (Overton, 2009; Rhinehart & Short, 1994), and it could be argued that the existing ECE&C environment leads to levels of disempowerment for practitioners. In a constructivist view of empowerment, the power relations existing in an environment that is driven by consumerism, marketisation and which has been characterised as a 'low skill – low pay trap' (Bretherton, 2010, p. 7) have constructed an identity of disempowerment found in the contemporary early childhood workforce.

This discussion on the ECE&C workforce provides a context for examining empowerment in the context of the notion of the educator as expert and the family as seeking help. If indeed the workforce is largely a disempowered group their capacity to take on the role as help giver to a disempowered parent will be affected if they do not feel empowered in their role. The author goes on to argue that empowerment is multifaceted, and that not all educators feel disempowered in their role. Empowerment is constructed and enabled through myriad personal and societal constructs that influence feelings of self-efficacy, control and identity leading to a sense of empowerment at an individual level. While the ECE&C sector in Australia exists in a climate where the sector is undervalued, and in which there are poor pay and conditions and low levels of job satisfaction, this may not account for why some educators are empowered and others are not. For FCP to be enacted effectively, educators need to



enable parents to become empowered participants in decision making. This is reliant in turn on the level of empowerment held by the educator. An educator who holds a perception of themselves as having control, competence and confidence is likely to have greater capacity to empower parents than one who is feeling undervalued and has a low level of self-efficacy.

## **Chapter 6 Family-centred practice as a model of partnership**

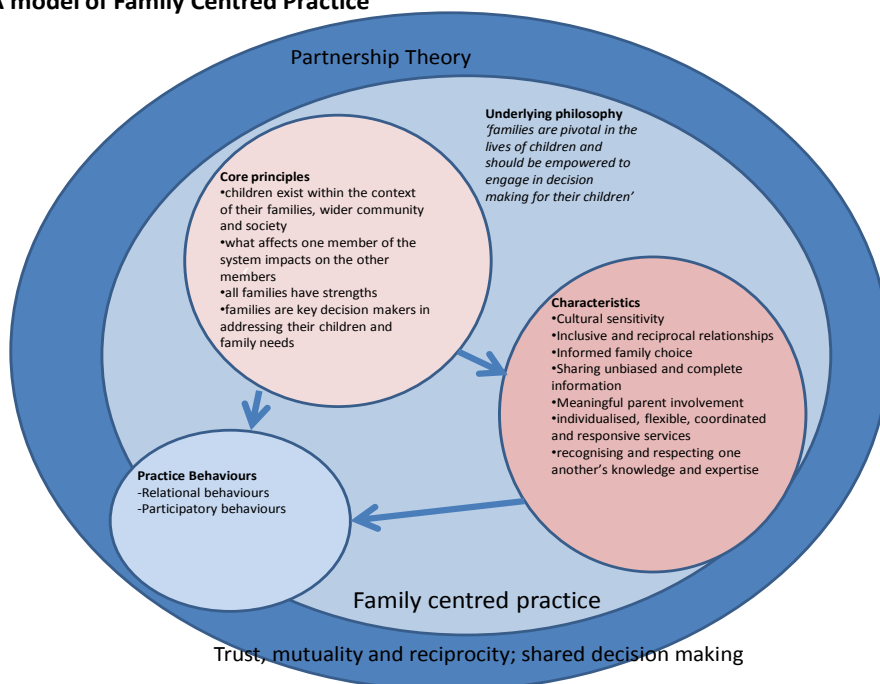
The previous chapters have introduced the reader to a body of literature surrounding partnerships and FCP. The review of the literature explores partnerships from a theoretical construct as well as examining partnerships more specifically as they sit within the context of education broadly and also in ECE&C. FCP has been presented by reviewing the literature from a historical background and context as well as examining FCP from a more theoretical stance.

This chapter brings these literature chapters together, and evolves a model whereby FCP can clearly be viewed as sitting within a broader partnership framework. Through a synthesis of the literature, a model evolved in which FCP is identified as sitting within a broader partnership framework which now brings together conceptually the two complementary, but in some ways contrasting, policy documents from which the ECE&C field needs to mediate its practice. This model also provides an awareness of what FCP looks like in practice – filling a gap in understanding created when FCP was introduced in the VEYLDF with little analysis of what this practice entails.

Partnership theory identifies a framework whereby trust, mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision making underlies the relationships. This framework underpins FCP in that families are seen as equal partners and key decision makers, and that there is a mutual sharing of knowledge and reciprocal recognition of strengths and expertise. The following diagram (Figure 3) presents FCP as a model of partnership by bringing

together the interconnections and interrelationships between the core principles, the characteristics and the practice behaviours identified in the literature which are central to FCP, and viewing these using a partnership lens. Positioned within the underlying philosophy that families are pivotal in the lives of their children and should be empowered decision makers in their children’s lives, the core principles, characteristics, and behaviours provide a way of examining relationships as effectively reflecting FCP as a partnership approach.

### A model of Family Centred Practice



**Figure 3 Conceptual model of family-centred practice as viewed through a partnership framework**

## 6.1 The underpinning philosophy

FCP is underpinned by a philosophy that has at its heart a belief in and commitment to an acknowledgement of parents as pivotal in the lives of their children. This aspect of

FCP governs the behaviour, the practice and the nature of the interactions that educators enact when working with families. This belief moves the professional from positioning themselves as the decision maker, determining what is in the best interests of the child, based on their own understanding, to that of a contributor to the decision making process in partnership with the family. It is a belief in the systemic nature of families that underpins this, as what affects one member of the family system impacts the rest. Families as co-contributors in decision making are using this understanding of the child in the context of their family system to inform the decision making.

Recognising that the family is pivotal in the lives of children creates a context whereby families are then empowered as decision makers creating a new context of reciprocal shared understanding. This empowered decision making is fundamental to the philosophy of FCP. If the family does not view themselves as empowered in determining goals and sharing in decisions, then they are not engaging in a true partnership. Bringing these two elements of the underpinning philosophy together creates the foundation of the model.

## **6.2 Principles and characteristics underpinning FCP**

If families are to be recognised as pivotal in the lives of their children, then it is necessary to understand core principles inherent in FCP: that children exist in the context of their families, the wider community and society and that what affects one family member impacts on all the others. However while this might appear to be self-evident, it is only by connecting this with an awareness that all families have strengths and are experts in knowing their own child, can families become empowered decision makers.

In the model as it has developed, if this understanding of the family is not apparent, then the practice behaviours of the professionals will not be effective. Decision making that focuses on the child in isolation from the broader family system cannot be completely family centred. Shared decision making occurs when the feelings, beliefs and priorities for the family are supported and incorporated, along with the perspectives from the professional who has a level of expertise and knowledge that can support effective and responsive decision making. Recognising the strengths that exist within the family and drawing on these to inform the decision making and enactment of these decisions are central to FCP.

FCP is characterised by relationships and practices that are culturally sensitive, inclusive, reciprocal, flexible and responsive. There is an interconnection between these characteristics and the core underpinning principles. Cultural sensitivity requires an understanding of the child and the family from an ecological perspective, positioning the family as existing within a wider community and society, recognising the interrelationship between the cultural values and beliefs and the priorities, expectations and needs of the family. Enmeshed within this, and important for creating mutuality, trust and reciprocity, are relationships and practices that focus on the uniqueness and individuality of the family unit. Inclusive practices are those whereby each family felt welcome, accepted, listened to and valued. The attitudes, approaches and practices ensure that individual families are not excluded or isolated, but instead, their values, beliefs and expectations are recognised as strengths and essential to decision making. Reciprocal practices are those in which there is a respect for the differing values, beliefs and expectations that may be present between the families and

the professionals creating a space for dialogue whereby each learn from the other (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997).

### **6.3 Relational and participatory behaviours**

While the key characteristics are fundamental to FCP, of vital importance to the model are the relational and participatory behaviours of families and professionals as active participants in the decision-making process. The underlying philosophy of FCP is that parents are empowered as decision makers for their children. The behaviour and practice of the professional enables this sense of empowerment to develop. The behavioural practices of the professional are both relational and participatory. It is not enough to create relationships that are culturally sensitive, inclusive and respectful; the practice behaviour of the professional is critical in empowering families in active decision making. For families to be empowered decision makers, the professionals need to create a context through their practice that enables this active participation to occur, in ways that are flexible, meaningful and respectful. The relational behaviours are those interpersonal connections that lead to mutual, reciprocal and trusting relationships. The participatory behaviours create the context whereby the families are enabled to actively share in meaningful decision making.

Participatory behaviours are those where information sharing is unbiased and complete, recognising and respecting the cultural context of the family, acknowledging and respecting the strengths inherent in the family unit, and incorporating these into any decision making. Participatory behaviours are behaviours that enable families to be active and respected partners in decision making by acknowledging and respecting their expertise in having a unique insight into their own child – actively seeking this

unique viewpoint. Enabling and supporting families in the decisions they have made, and acknowledging and respecting their rights as active partners, leads to empowerment, because it builds perceptions of control, competence and confidence.

The model that has evolved within this study positions FCP firmly within a partnership framework and provides a means to examine practice as it can be measured against the principles and characteristics which define it. This model is used to examine the extent to which the interactions between the educators and the families participating in this study can be defined as FCP. The previous chapters provide the context for the study, by introducing a background and a review of the relevant literature that has led to the development of a model to define FCP. The following chapters present the study as it has been undertaken, outlining the methodology, the research design and the findings, and then discussing these findings as they provide insight into the research questions.

# Chapter 7 Methodology

This study examines the effectiveness of family partnerships in ECE&C through the analysis of the nature of interactions between educators and parents. Using a qualitative methodology is considered most effective for seeking answers to the key question:

How effective is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between them, as determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity?

This chapter presents a justification for the adoption of this approach by examining constructivist epistemology and how this supports the study, and an exploration of symbolic interactionism as a perspective through which the findings are analysed. The chapter discusses the research design, examining the use of qualitative case study as a methodology and discussing semi-structured interviews and artefacts tools for collecting data in interpretive studies. The discussion on the approach taken in analysing and synthesising the data concludes this chapter.

## 7.1 Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research has an orientation towards an understanding of human interactions and ‘involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). It is a ‘situated activity that locates the observer in the world’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3) where the researcher becomes immersed in a natural setting and attempts to make sense of the phenomena by interpreting the meanings the



participants bring to the study. Qualitative research is based on the philosophical assumption that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds, and the researcher seeks to interpret how the participants make sense of their worlds (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Qualitative research emphasises that social and personal realities are created rather than discovered, and ‘highlights human participation in the construction of reality’ (Raskin, 2002, in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 10). This is particularly relevant for the present study because here the researcher is inquiring into the way the participants individually have constructed a reality as they perceive it to be, and the reality is the perceptions they hold as to the nature of the relationships that exist. Richie and Spencer (in Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 325) describe qualitative methodology as explaining as well as illuminating people’s attitudes, experiences and behaviour. For each of the participants their experiences are unique, because meaning is embedded in the participants’ own experiences, and own individual interpretations of these experiences. It is these unique experiences that have created the personal understandings they hold as to the effectiveness of the interactions in building partnerships.

Patton (in Merriam, 1998), describes qualitative research as seeking understanding, which is an end in itself, not a predictor of what may happen in the future. Similarly, in this study, qualitative research is used to seek to understand the nature of the setting, what it means for the participants to be in that setting, and the meaning they attach to their lived experiences.

In this study the researcher is seeking to gain an understanding of the nature of the interactions between the educators and the parents. In doing so, the researcher is

immersing herself in the real world of the participants and making sense of the phenomena, the nature of the interactions, by interpreting the perspectives of the participants themselves. There can be no absolute truth, because the reality of each participant is unique to that participant. The researcher is interpreting the language of the participants and finding meaning as to what it means for the participants to be in that setting, the meaning they attach to their lived experiences as they interpret the interactions through their own individual perspectives.

Denzin & Lincoln (2005) use the analogy of a quilt maker or *bricoleur* when writing about the qualitative researcher, as they describe the researcher as being like a quilt maker who pieces together sets of representations that are fitted together to the specifics of a complex situation (p. 4). They go on to extend the analogy by discussing that the quilter stitches, edits and puts together slices of reality to construct the 'quilt', which changes and takes on new forms as the quilter uses different methods or tools in constructing the finished product, which they describe as a set of fluid, interconnected representations (p. 6). Building a picture of the beliefs and understandings of each of the participants in this study, as they shared their lived experiences to create meaning around the nature of the interactions between the parents and educators, is reflected in this analogy. The researcher is stitching, shaping and organising the 'slices of reality' presented by the participants to construct the 'quilt', which is the interconnected representations of each of the participants as they discuss their reality of the partnership.

In using a qualitative methodology the researcher is interested in interpreting and searching for understanding and explanation of the phenomena being explored, rather

than testing a theory or hypothesis, looking at the perspective of the participants, rather than the researchers (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The ‘phenomena’ in the present study are the interactions that occur between the participants. The meaning that is applied to the phenomena by the participants as they look through the lens of partnership creates the understanding of the interactions as they reflect effective partnerships.

### **7.1.1 Paradigmatic stance**

Undertaking qualitative research requires the researcher to take up a paradigmatic stance as to the nature of reality and how knowledge is created, located and understood. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) describe a research paradigm as encompassing three elements: ontology, epistemology and the methodology (p. 99). ‘Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these in turn give rise to methodological considerations’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, cited in Cohen et al., 2007, p. 5). Within this context the researcher situates themselves within a position of belief that shapes the research process and design. Qualitative research sits within a paradigm in which the researcher is seeking to get inside the participant and view them from within, to understand the human experiences as interpreted by the individual. An interpretive paradigm embraces the idea of multiple realities, where reality and knowledge are constructed by the individual, and where for each participant, the constructed reality is subjective and determined by the participant themselves. Reality is multilayered and complex. No two realities are the same, because no two individuals are identical or have the same experiences from which to construct their version of reality. An interpretive paradigm is characterised by concern for the individual and the

individual interpretation of their own reality, and how they interpret the world around them (Cohen et al., 2007).

This ontological stance has informed the design and approach taken in the present study. Following the belief that the nature of reality – what is interpreted as reality – has been constructed and interpreted based on the understanding of the individual, leads to positioning this study within a constructivist epistemological stance within an interpretive paradigm. In the present study the researcher is seeking to understand the subjective world of human experience and to get inside the thinking and meaning given to the reality by the research participants (Cohen et al., 2007) through analysing the nature of interactions between educators and parents, as interpreted by the educators and parents themselves. There can be no question here of absolute truth, because in examining the reality of each of the participants, the truth as they see it is interpreted from their own reality, and constructed from the meanings they give to the experiences.

### **7.1.2 Constructivism**

Constructivism is an epistemology that assumes multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hatch, 2007). It presents a view of reality in which each individual interprets and constructs reality based on their experiences and interactions with the environment, and with others. The constructivist epistemological stance accepts that there are multiple ways of understanding and knowing the world, and the meanings applied to the construction of reality represent a particular point of view (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 7). Central to a constructivist belief is that knowledge is constructed, rather than discovered (Stake, 1995, p. 99). Constructivism sits within an interpretivist framework, because it is based on the belief that the meaning of what is reality is interpreted by the

individual from their own perspective, which has been formed as a result of their distinctive set of experiences and social interactions. What is reality for one may not be the reality of another. The social context is critical in the construction of reality. This reality is determined by the interactions between human beings and their world, but the interpretation of these interactions and this world leads to personal realities.

Constructivism describes the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them (Crotty, 1998, p. 79).

Several key characteristics position research as constructivist by definition. The first is that the researcher is seeking to understand the perspectives of the participants as they create a picture of their own understanding and realities. Using the language and the actions of the participants to provide meaning, the researcher constructs and interprets the reality as presented by the participants to provide meaning. To do this the researcher goes into the field to gather the data (Merriam, 1998). In constructivist research the study is situated in the natural space and the data collected uses the language of people to create the knowledge. Events are allowed to unfold naturally and there are no expectations as to the course they will take (Patton, 2002).

While constructivist epistemology has branched off into different ways of thinking about constructivism, the approach of the social constructionist view has guided the methodology of the present study. Social constructivism is predicated on the idea that lived experiences are socially constructed, understood in multiple contexts and influenced by the historical and cultural experiences of known individuals (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 5). Social constructionists believe that the interactions with others create the realities and meanings for the individual, and that meanings and

understanding have their beginnings in social interaction. Crotty (1998) describes social constructivism as emphasising the hold our culture has on us in the way we see and feel things, which in turn defines our understanding of our world (p. 58). In social constructivist research, the researcher looks for the complexity of views, rather than narrowing the meaning into a few categories or ideas (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Because this study examines interactions between individuals, the perceptions of the interactions within a social context has created reality for each participant. Each individual notion of reality is formed through interaction with others and through the cultural norms that operate in the individuals' lives (Creswell, 2007, p. 21), and the participants' own views of the situation guide the analysis of the data.

Lock & Strong (2010) present a discussion on what they describe as the broad tenets that hold for social constructivism, and these tenets are relevant to this study because they create a construct for examining the interpretations of the participants. The authors also offer the view that social constructivism is concerned with meaning and understanding. They see meaning making as being influenced by the socio-cultural process that are specific to a particular time and place. Their thinking centres on the importance language and the meaning and understanding given to the symbols within language have in influencing the construct of reality. This reality, and the meaning given it, can change as new understandings emerge through new interpretations given to the symbols of language. Berger and Luckmann (as cited in Best, 2008) argue that human beings inevitably use language to assign meanings to the world and that language is learned from other human beings. It is this premise that has guided the data collection and analysis in the present study as the researcher is seeking to gain insight

into the meanings assigned to the nature of the interactions that exist through hearing language used by the participants.

The concept of meaning as a socio-cultural process is central to this study, along with language and the symbolic interpretation of language in the construction of meaning and reality. The participant views, as presented in the language they use to reflect on and explain their realities, are key to the interpretations given by the researcher. The socio-cultural experiences and processes are specific to the time and place of the study that influence the participants' perspectives of their own realities. What becomes apparent in the findings is that the individual participants place different interpretations and understandings on the nature of the interactions as building effective partnerships. The socio-cultural process has an influence on the meanings given to particular phenomena by individual participants. The symbolic nature of the language used has been shaped by the interpretations given to the meanings created and the embedded socio-cultural processes that were specific to particular time and place of the study.

### **7.1.3 Symbolic interactionism**

Building on the perspective that language as a basis of symbols and interpretation of these symbols are critical in the construction of reality and meaning making, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism has been used to guide the research design for this study.

Symbolic interactionism presents a perspective from which to view the construction of reality and meaning. Based on the work of Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism builds on the notion of meaning and reality as being derived from social interactions with others, which are modified and adapted through an interpretive process. Central to

his thinking is the notion that people's actions result from their interpretations of the situations that confront them in their everyday lives. He saw symbolic interactionism as

a social product, a creation that is formed in and through the defining actions of people as they interact (Blumer, 1969, p. 5).

He goes on to argue that

meanings are not static but must be constantly constructed and reconstructed by actors during social interaction (Donmoyer, 2000, p. 49).

Fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the notion of the social construction of meaning (Rivalland, 2010), which is why symbolic interactionism sits within the constructivist paradigm. Humans are social beings engaged in social interactions in social groupings. In social groupings the actions and activities of members of the group affect, and are responded to, by others in the group, and are seen in terms of their relationships to one another. This notion is important in the context of this study in that the researcher is seeking to explore to what extent the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators are influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants. Socio-cultural theory presents a framework for viewing learning and behaviour as being shaped by ones interactions, experiences and understandings derived from participating in a broad social and cultural context. Rogoff (1998) argues that an individual cannot be studied in isolation from the social, and that the individual, interpersonal and cultural processes are not independent entities. Members of the group create shared meanings from their interactions with one another, and these shared meanings become their constructed reality. Social interaction is the essence for the construction of meaning.



Within the symbolic interactionist tradition, language and the self have been held as essential for understanding human action (Schwalbe, 1983, p. 291).

In the early 1920s George Mead presented his view of social interaction as occurring through an interpretation of gestures and symbols. Followers of Mead symbolic interactionist tradition see meaning as constructed in the symbols inherent in language. The individual makes meaning through their interpretation of the language that surrounds them, which leads to their construction of reality. A symbolic interactionist argues that for mutual realities to exist, a common understanding of the language needs also to exist and that the individuals (the actors) act and interact as a consequence of the interpretations we place in the language used by the actors. In symbolic interactionism, the actor puts themselves in the place of the other, but by doing so they use their own 'reality'. They interpret understanding based on a subjective understanding of the meaning given.

When using a symbolic interactionist lens to examine the constructed realities, the world of lived reality and situation-specific meaning is 'constructed by 'social actors' who fashion meaning out of events and prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language and action' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 7). Human beings react to phenomena on the basis of the meanings and realities they have constructed in response to the interactions with this social group. Symbolic interactionism supports the view of subjective realities. The reality, and the meaning attached to the understanding of that reality, is constructed by the understanding that has derived from the symbols attached to the language and objects produced and represented by others. The individual aligns their actions to those of others and each one puts themselves 'in the place of the other' (Crotty, 1998, p. 75), interpreting

‘reality’ based on the interpretation of the responses of others. The emphasis on symbols and the interpretive process guides the symbolic interactionist in understanding human behaviour. Attention is given to how particular interactions ‘give rise to symbolic understandings’ (Patton, 2002, p. 113). The individual becomes an ‘actor’ in their own reality as they perform in this social world and try to influence others ‘definition of the situation’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 24). The situation must be seen as the actor sees it. By implication, successful sharing of reality can only occur between individuals who are able to take the role of the other.

The symbolic interactionist directs their attention to trying to understand the nature of the interactions and the dynamics inherent in the activities that are taking place between people. They look for the performance, and the language used in the performance, to create the reality from the standpoint of the actors, rather than focusing on the individual and individual characteristics or situations.

In focussing on the interaction itself as a unit of study, the symbolic interactionist creates a more active image of the human being and rejects the image of the passive, determined organism (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 24)

In the present study the symbolic interactionist perspective has been used to guide the research design and the interpretation of the findings. Through choosing to use interviews of both educators and parents, the participants become the actors who use the language to present the constructed meaning of their own reality interpreted by the subjective understandings that they have aligned to the actions of others.

## **7.2 The research design**

### **7.2.1 A qualitative case study**

In keeping with the interpretive paradigmatic approach, a qualitative case study method has been chosen to design this research study. This approach was chosen because

a case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and a product of that inquiry (Stake, 1995, p. 444).

This study is both a process of inquiry about the case which, in this context, is the nature of the partnership within the context of the unique setting, as well as the product of that inquiry that presents the findings as they are derived from the unique setting. In case study research there is an emphasis on interpretation of meaning as it exists within ‘the case’ of the study, and describes the reality as it exists within the particular context. A case study is an investigation of phenomena as it exists within a real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011; Gray, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2003), and is about gaining an understanding into the how and the why of the phenomena or event, within the contextual conditions. Case studies explore and investigate real-life phenomena through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions (Zainal, 2007, p. 2) by uncovering the relationship that between the phenomenon and the context in which the phenomenon occurs. This understanding of case studies is particularly pertinent to the current study. By undertaking a case study, the researcher is seeking to uncover the relationship between the phenomenon, the nature of the partnership and the context of the ECE&C setting where the investigation took place. Stark and Torrence (2004) present a view of case study that is particularly relevant to the present research. Their discussion of case study argues that from the perspective of a case study one can assume that ‘social reality’ is created through social

interaction and examines the social construction of meaning ‘in situ’ (p. 33). This reinforces the notion that realities are socially constructed and meaning making underpins the interpretivist paradigm. As such, a case study is creating an understanding of ‘the case rather than generalising to a population at large’ (Stark & Torrence, 2004, p. 33)

Case study research allows the exploration and understanding of a particular phenomenon as it exists within a ‘bounded system’ (Smith, as cited in Stake, 1995, p. 2), the unit of analysis that defines what the ‘case’ is. The bounded system, or unit of analysis, may be an individual, an entity an event or a phenomenon (Yin, 2003).

Viewing the case as a bounded system creates a finite quality to the case as it relates to time, space or the unit of analysis (Merriam, 2002), and sets the parameters of the phenomenon that is the case, or as described by Merriam (1998), can ‘fence in’ that which is being studied (p. 27).

The concept of ‘boundedness’ is particularly relevant to the present study, because in this study the ‘bounded system’ is the relationships between the educators and families involved in one ECE&C setting, and the constructed realities of the participants in describing them. The notion of boundedness has created a finite parameter for the context of inquiry that provides a focus for the research. ‘Fencing’ the phenomenon within the one unique setting has provided a rich description of phenomenon as it exists within this setting and is ‘intrinsic’ to this unique case. An ‘intrinsic case study’ (Stake, 1995; 2000) is undertaken to learn about a unique phenomenon. Stake argues that an intrinsic case study is undertaken because first and last because one wants a better understanding of this particular case. In the present research study there is an interest in

understanding the nature of partnerships as they exist – not in all ECE&C settings, but to gain a better understanding of this particular case.

### **7.2.2 Selecting the sample**

The case in the present study has been designed to enable the investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents by seeking out the voices of the parents and educators themselves. In keeping with the approach outlined by Stark and Torrence to achieve rich description and depth, rather than coverage, for presenting phenomena from the perspective of the participants (2004, p. 33), a unique site was chosen in which to undertake the investigation. Four parents and six educators were interviewed to gain their perceptions of the interactions as they existed within the model of partnership defined as FCP. The site chosen was a long day child care centre located in the outer growth corridor of Melbourne's northern suburbs.

Using 'non-probability sampling' (Cohen et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998) the centre chosen was 'purposively selected on the basis of its meeting a specific purpose or possessing the particular characteristics being sought' (p. 114). In purposive sampling 'cases are handpicked for a specific reason' (Lewin, 2005, p. 219) because of their ability to inform an understanding of the phenomena of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The characteristics being sought for the purposes of the research include the provision of care and education programs to children from birth to six years, familiarity and understanding of the VEYLDF and a broad demographic of families utilising the service as well as educators employed in the service. Stake (2005) discusses the relevance of selecting a case of some typicality, but also in selecting cases that offer an opportunity to learn from them (p. 451). In the context of this study, the case reflects a

typical sample because the criteria for purposefully selecting the site reflects the broad typicality of like services in the field, meeting the characteristics identified above. The findings of the study also provide insight for the field from which to learn because they reflect the practice and perceptions of a typical setting.

The chosen centre had been one of forty sites participating in the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) trial of the VEYLDF, and this was seen as being an important factor in choosing a site for the case study, because it was expected that the educators and parents would have a familiarity with the VEYLDF and therefore an understanding of the expectations and approaches in the framework to creating partnerships using family-centred practice.

A second criterion guiding the selection of the site was the diversity of demographic regarding families and educators. Because the research sought to understand to what extent the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators was influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants, a broad range of cultural, educational and life experiences of both families and educators was an important factor. It was also important when choosing a site for the case that this diversity was reflected by the educators in the chosen centre as well as within the parent group, so that diversity could be explored during the interviews.

The VCAA was approached to identify services that met the criteria, minimising possible bias by the researcher. The nominated services were then contacted by the VCAA to gauge interest in participating in the research. Only one site which met the determined criteria expressed an interest in participating in the research, and so was selected. The researcher

proceeded to make contact with the centre manager and to provide a plain language statement, written information and consent forms for participating in the research.

### **7.2.3 The case site**

The centre provides care and education for up to 125 children, with on average sixty children attending daily. Opened in 1997, the centre<sup>5</sup> has strong connections with the local community and is well known by local families, with many of the families of children attending the centre either living or working in the community or the local municipality.

The community in which the centre is located is very diverse and multicultural, with nearly 40 per cent of the township having been born overseas, and a large number of residents second-generation Australian, mainly coming from Turkish backgrounds. Turkish and Arabic are the most spoken languages after English. There is a large Muslim community within the township, with nearly 25 per cent of residents following the Islamic faith.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting the demographics of the municipality, the centre also has many families who were either born overseas or are second-generation Australian. Over 18 languages are spoken by families across the centre, the most prevalent being English, Turkish and Arabic.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all families live in the community, or communities surrounding where the centre is located.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this study the setting used in the case study will be referred to as 'the centre'.

<sup>6</sup> Based on ABS data 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Anecdotal information provided by centre manager (6.10.2010)

The staff and centre management spoke strongly of community as being a feature of the philosophy of the centre. Twenty-four staff are employed in the centre, undertaking various roles in management, direct work with children and in ancillary roles such as those of the centre cook or cleaner. Over half of the staff also live in the local community or in the wider municipality, and for some, their own children attend local schools. Many staff also are fluent in the community languages spoken across the centre, particularly Turkish, Arabic, Greek and Italian, which they frequently use in their engagement with the families and extended families.

Throughout the research, this sense of being part of a wider community became very evident in my visits to the site, and is reflected in the practice of the staff across the centre. At the time of this research study the centre had experienced an extended period of stability in staff and the management team. The centre manager and assistant manager had been at the centre for ten years and staff interviewed all reported having worked in the centre for a minimum of three years, although others had been there longer. Many of the families also had been involved at the centre for many years as younger children took the place of older siblings moving in to their more formal school years.

All of the staff were women, who came from a range of backgrounds and experiences, with the oldest being close to sixty years, and the youngest being in their early twenties. Many of these staff were married, with their own children. Some were grandparents, and some were single and living at home with their parents. At least one



of the early childhood educators<sup>8</sup> had her own child attending the centre, and others had older children who had previously attended the centre in their early childhood years.

The centre was part of a larger early childhood community hub that also includes a sessional kindergarten program<sup>9</sup> and a maternal and child health program.<sup>10</sup> While these programs were autonomous, there was a strong relationship between each of the programs and the staff supporting these programs. All programs housed within the community hub were managed at a central level by the local council, which also managed several other early childhood services across the municipality, which include other long day child care centres, sessional kindergartens and maternal and child health programs.

#### **7.2.4 Participants in the study and the recruitment process**

The participants for the study were selected from both the parent group and the educators working in the centre. Initially it was envisaged that five parents and five educators would be selected to participate in the study; however, four parent participants and six educator participants were included in the study. The participants were selected through a process of random sampling. Once the centre had been selected and consented to participate in the study, expressions of interest to be part of the study

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<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this study the early childhood educators, who are the staff responsible for designing and delivering the learning and development programs for the children are referred to as ‘educators’.

<sup>9</sup> A sessional kindergarten program is one which has a stronger focus on early education and where children in the year prior to commencing school attend for up to fifteen hours a week, over three or four days. The program is designed and delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher and operates in line with school terms.

<sup>10</sup> The maternal and child health program is a state-funded program delivered by a triple-certificate nurse with a focus on the health and wellbeing of the child and the mother, and child development. Families access this program from birth of the child, until around five years of age, through individual consultation with the nurse at key stages of the child’s development.

were then distributed to all educators employed in the centre and all families of children enrolled in the program. A total of 230 expressions of interest (EOIs) were distributed in total. To maintain confidentiality a sealed drop box to which only the researcher had access was used for returning the completed EOIs.

Initially, only two EOIs were returned from the parent group and no EOIs were returned from the educator group. A further letter written by the researcher to each family was then again distributed to each family. This resulted in two additional responses. The researcher then made contact with the parents who had responded, but one of these families had since left the program. In order to increase the number of responses, educators approached individual parents who they believed may be interested in participating in the research. These parents were then provided with a direct phone number of the researcher, and one additional parent made contact with the researcher. This direct contact eliminated the intervention of the educators and maintained the confidentiality of the participating parents, because the educators were not privy to the names of families who responded in this way.

While the initial approach to the educators also resulted in a nil response, the centre manager actively encouraged educators to participate. Information on the research study was presented by the centre manager during a staff meeting. This resulted in six educators individually responding to the researcher's invitation to participate, via an EOI which was anonymously returned to the researcher. While initially it was intended that interviews with staff would be undertaken outside of staffing hours and away from the centre, the researcher was invited to spend the morning in the centre during a pupil-free day, and individual educators could participate in an interview with her throughout

the morning. A private room was made available to the researcher to enable the interviews to be undertaken. Six individual educators participated in a one-hour interview on this day. The identity of those who participated was not disclosed to the centre manager or the staffing group.

The parent participants were all women and all lived locally. One parent participant worked in the local area, one was a full-time student and two worked outside the municipality. All parent participants had tertiary qualifications and were aged between 30 and 45. One parent participant was from a Turkish background, one from an Italian background and the other two were from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. All participants were English speaking; however, for two of the participants, this was not their home language. Table 1 below outlines the profile of the parent participants.

**Table 1 Parent participant profile**

<b>Participant<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>Cultural background</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Ages and gender of children</b>	<b>Years at centre</b>
Sarah	Turkish	Full-time student studying degree	4 (male) and 2 (male)	4
Vivienne	Anglo-Celtic	Medical receptionist	6 (female) and 4 (male)	6
Theresa	Italian	Office administration	7 (male) 4 (female)	7
Alison	Anglo-Celtic	Primary school teacher	4 (female)	4

While the study had originally been planned to include a sample size of five educators, the six educators in the study self-identified to participate and so were all included. As with the parent group, these educators were also all women, and were representative of the educator group employed at the centre. At the time of the study twenty-four

<sup>11</sup> The participants were given pseudonyms to maintain privacy and to de-identify them.

educators were employed at the site, all female and all aged between twenty and sixty years. The educator group held a qualification levels at both certificate and diploma level, with at least one educator upgrading her qualifying to a teaching degree at the time of the study. The staff at the centre also came from a range of diverse cultural and language backgrounds.

The six educator participants reflected similar broad demographics. Three of the educator participants had completed an early childhood diploma-level qualification, while three had certificate-level qualifications. At the time of the study, one of the diploma-qualified educators was completing an early childhood teaching qualification, which she was studying in part time. The educator participants were employed in a range of roles and across a range of age groups, including room assistant, room leader and integration support worker. At the time of the study one participant was acting in the role of second in charge. The participants had between two and twenty years' experience in ECE&C, with five of the six participants having worked in other settings and across a range of roles over the years. Four of the six educator participants were from non-Anglo Celtic cultural backgrounds. Table 2 below presents a profile of the six educators who participated in the study.

**Table 2 Educator participant profile**

<b>Partici- pant<sup>12</sup></b>	<b>Age bracket</b>	<b>Qualification level</b>	<b>Cultural back- ground</b>	<b>Exper- ience in ECE&amp;C</b>	<b>Length of time at centre</b>	<b>Current role</b>
Kylie	20–25	Diploma	Anglo Celtic	5 years	4 years	Second in charge
Susie	20–25	Diploma – studying part- time for degree	Anglo Celtic	2 years	2 years (except for first	Room leader – 2–3 year olds

<sup>12</sup> The participants were given pseudonyms to maintain privacy and to de-identify them.

					month)	
Maria	45–50	Diploma	Turkish	5years	5 years	Assistant/room leader – 0–2 age group
Rosa	45–50	Certificate III	Turkish	7 years causal working from home	2 years	Assistant – 2–3 year olds
Alina	45–50	Certificate III	Turkish	9 years	6 years	Integration support worker Assistant – 3–5 year olds
Connie	55–60	Certificate III	Italian	20 years	12 years	Assistant – 0–2 year olds

### 7.2.5 Methods of data collection

The most commonly used methods for case study research are interview, document analysis and observation (Stark & Torrence, 2004, p. 35). Yin (2003) argues that interviews are one of the most important sources of case study information (p. 89), and so, in keeping with case study design, semi-structured in-depth interviews of both parents and educators were used as one method for collecting the data. Interviews offer an insight into the respondent’s memories and explanations of why things have come to be as they are (Stark & Torrence, 2004, p. 35), which, for the present study, provided a rich understanding from the perspective of the participants as to the nature of the interactions and why they are as they are. Collection of documents and artefacts used by the centre to engage with parents and families were also included in the data collection, as well as field notes taken by the researcher throughout the data collection phase of the study. Documents play a valid role in data collection for cases study research because they are created for a specific purpose, enabling the researcher to become a ‘vicarious observer’ as they reflect communication among the parties (Yin,

2003, p. 87), which, in the current study, is a communication between the educators and the parents.

### **7.2.6 Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

O'Donoghue (2007) argues that:

a researcher adopting a symbolic interactionist theoretical approach when conducting research within an interpretivist paradigm is concerned with revealing the perspectives behind empirical observations, the actions people take in the light of their perspectives, the patterns which develop through the interaction of perspectives and actions over particular periods of time (p. 20).

O'Donoghue sees that collecting data through the use of guided questions in semi-structured or open-ended interviews as a mechanism for gaining this understanding. Semi-structured interviews allow for questions asked of participants by the researcher to evolve as the interview progresses. They are used when the researcher is seeking to compare responses while 'simultaneously seeking to fully understand their unique experiences' (Mills et al., 2010, p. 495). While the focus and direction of the interview is planned in advance, semi-structured interviews provide scope for the interviewer to omit, re-order or vary the wording to further probe the issues that emerge (Lodico et al., 2010).

The four parent participants were interviewed over several months, beginning in November 2010 and finishing in July 2011. Each parent participated in an individual interview of around an hour's duration, and the venue of the interview was selected by each participant to reflect their individual circumstances. One interview was in the parent's family home, two in coffee shops close to the participants' places of work and one took place in the ECE&C centre. While it had been envisaged that the interviews of

these participants would occur within reasonable time proximity to one another, due to the difficulties in recruiting participants, the interview schedule was stretched over several months. Permission was sought from each participant to audio-record each interview and three of the interviews were duly recorded and later transcribed. Field notes were written directly after the non-recorded interview providing a written record of the informant's response. The participants were asked to reflect on and respond to a range of open-ended questions that focused on gaining insight into their perceptions of the nature of the interactions they have with the educators, the socio-cultural factors, experiences and behaviours that they felt influenced the nature of the interaction process and their expectations and understanding of the relationships as sitting within a framework of partnership (see Appendix C).

The six educator participants were all individually interviewed at the centre over a single day in January 2011. Each interview lasted around an hour and were all digitally recorded and later transcribed. As with the parent interviews, each interview was designed to gain insight into their perceptions of the nature of the interactions between themselves and the parents, the socio-cultural factors, experiences and behaviours that may influence the nature of the interaction process, and their perceptions of their interactions as occurring within a model of FCP as a model of partnership (see Appendix D).

#### ***7.2.6.1 Limitations of interviews***

Interviews as a source of data collection in qualitative research are not without their limitations. The success and validity of an interview rests on the extent to which the beliefs, perspectives and opinions are truly reflected. The interview is a social situation,

and inherently involves a relationship between the interviewer and the informant (Huberman and Miles, 2002, p. 54) because it exists at the occasion of the interview.

The interviews employed in this study are there to present the interviewees' voices, which can be influenced by a range of factors. There is a relationship in an interview between the interviewer and the respondent that is unique to the interview context. People respond differently in an interview situation depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions. Denscombe describes this as the 'interviewer effect' (2010, p. 178), suggesting that the interviewer identity, or the perceived identity, will have a bearing on the amount or extent of information the interviewee wishes to reveal. In the instance of this research study, while the participants had no pre-existing relationship with the participants, she did have a pre-existing presence in the ECE&C sector and a professional acquaintance with the centre manager through having visited student educators on placement in the centre in her role in pre-service training. The educator participants may therefore have had a perception of the nature of the responses being sought during the interview or the 'correct' responses that they needed to provide to meet a perceived expectation of the interviewer. Denscombe also suggests that the nature of the topic being discussed may impact on the validity of the responses of the interviewees (2010, p. 178), an idea echoed by Gomm (2003). In this study, however, the topic being discussed was one which the interviewees were familiar, with and at a previous trial site were confident in their practices, so this was not an affecting limitation for the study. Likewise, the parent participants had what appeared from their responses to have positive feelings about the nature of the interactions they had with the educators, so again, for this study it was not an apparent limiting factor.



Further attempts to counteract the limitations posed in using interviews in this study included the researcher trialling the questions prior to undertaking the interviews with the participants. Trialling the questions enabled modification and refinement to exclude any misleading or confusing questions, or the pre-empting of responses so that the voices of the participant were central to the interview. In order to minimise any feelings of distress or a sense of needing to provide a correct response, the interviews were undertaken in venues familiar to the interviewees to ‘encourage the right climate for an interviewee to feel comfortable and provide honest answers’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 178). For the parent participants, the interviews were undertaken in a venue and at a time suggested by them. For the educator participants, the interviews were all undertaken in the centre, on the same day. The limitation of this was that each interview was undertaken directly when the previous one had concluded, resulting in the researcher not being able to reflect on responses. However, this was also a strength, in that it resulted in all interviews being guided by the original questions, leading to a minimising of any bias that may have been introduced, or a deviation led by the researcher if there had been a gap between the interviews to reflect on or begin analysing the responses.

### **7.2.7 Documents and artefacts as sources of data<sup>13</sup>**

Artefacts are a living example of the interpretation of the model in practice. Alongside the spoken word presented to reflect the lived experiences of the participants, the data also included a range of documents and artefacts. These were created by the educators

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<sup>13</sup> A list of the documents and artefacts is provided in Appendix 3. Because these contain identifying information regarding the site and the participants, actual copies have not been included.

to engage with families in the FCP setting. These artefacts are a living example of the interpretation of the model in practice.

Documentary evidence can consist of written, oral, visual or cultural artefacts (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 137).

In this study the documents and artefacts collected included copies of newsletters, the parent handbook and an example of a child's individual learning portfolio. There was broad range of displays and information boards in the centre which also provided examples of the interactions between the educators and the families. These displays and information boards were photographed to enable their inclusion in the analysis. The documents and artefacts were not included as a means of validating the analysis of the interviews, but, as discussed by Prior:

documents enter into episodes of social interaction in a dual manner. In the first place they enter as receptacles of content, and in the second they enter as functioning agents in their own right (2004, p. 346).

Prior views documents and artefacts as being 'active agents in schemes of human interaction' (p. 358), and in this study they were important because they reflected the human interaction between the educators and the families. The participants, through the interviews, gave their perceptions and understandings based on their own interpretations and beliefs.

'What people say' is often very different from 'what people do' (Hodder, 2000, p. 705).

Therefore, the documents and artefacts collected for this study are agents in their own right, and provide valuable and insightful data to build the examination of the nature of

the interactions between educators and families. Documents are usually created for different purposes and for different audiences, under different conditions, and therefore usually come with different methodological constraints (Linders, 2007). In the context of this study, however, the documents and artefacts produced by the educators all had a common purpose, which was to engage with the families of children using the service, in the context of this engagement sitting within a model of FCP. As a result of this intent, the documents and artefacts collected for this study were necessary and played an important role in analysing the nature of the interactions between educators and families.

### **7.3 Data analysis**

The review of the literature enabled FCP to be presented as a model sitting within a broader partnership framework of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making. This model provides a lens through which to analyse the data to explore the nature of the interactions between educators and families. The model shows the core principles and the key characteristics that underlie FCP.

A process of thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to interpret the data, which involved: ‘identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalties, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles’ (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). The transcripts were analysed by reading and rereading the transcripts and listening to the audiotapes of the voices of the participants concurrently recalling the nuances and body language that participants expressed during the interviews. Researcher comments were

then added to the transcripts, noting initial reflections and thoughts, recollections of nuances, body language and facial expressions, and points of initial interest to the researcher.

The first step in the data analysis process was to compile the data into a database to allow ease of analysis and provides an opportunity for the researcher to become familiar with the data (Yin, 2011). In the present research project, this involved a process of putting the interview transcriptions into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where the responses of the participants were broken down into cells that could be individually coded. Coding is the process ‘of sorting all data steps according to topics, themes, and issues important to the study’ (Stake, 2010, p. 151). The topics and themes important to the study were the core principles and key characteristics inherent in the model of FCP as they reflected those of partnerships. The spreadsheet was created in a matrix format with the passages from the interviews. The cells along the *y* axis in the matrix included all the participant responses from the transcribed interviews and each cell along the *x* axis was coded on the basis of the key underpinning principles and characteristics of partnership and FCP, as defined in the model discussed in Chapter 6. Two spreadsheets were created using this process, one for the educator participants and a second for the parent participants. The data from each participant was entered into a separate page, labelled by the pseudonym given to each participant. This approach to analysing the data was useful for the researcher in creating a way of coding each transcript. Creating a cell for each of the key principles and characteristics enabled the transcripts to be analysed to seek a response to the specific research question:

To what extent can the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators be defined as FCP?

The common themes arising from this coding were drawn together using Microsoft Word and then re-coded to find commonalities and differences in the perspectives of individual participants in the way they reflected their own understandings. By creating a further system of codes, the transcripts were further analysed to gain an understanding of how the key characteristics and principals, and practice behaviours of the model, were evident in the language of the participants in speaking about the relationships that had been created.

Following this analysis, the interview transcripts and the data matrices were then re-examined to seek insight into the second specific question:

To what extent is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants?

A core theorist examining socio-cultural learning is Barbara Rogoff, and her analytical approach provides a framework from which to examine the influences of the socio-cultural experiences on the nature of the interactions. Rogoff (1995) provides a model for analysis that allows for the use of 'activity' as the unit of analysis with 'active and dynamic contributions from individuals, their social partners and historical traditions and materials' (p. 140). Her belief is that these cannot be viewed in isolation and do not exist separately, but can be seen through different lenses: the personal, the interpersonal and the community/institutional (p. 141). This approach was used in the analysis of the

data where the personal (the beliefs, reflections, and experiences of the educators) were examined alongside the social context of the practice (the interpersonal), as influenced by the relationships between educators and families. The community/institutional focus provided a framework for practice as shaped by the policy directions and the influence of the centre manager in how she interpreted the policy. This third lens was also used in the analysis of the influence from this community perspective on the practice, and interpretations of practice, by the participants.

While the personal perspectives of educators and families had been presented through the interview process, the practice behaviours were further examined through analysing the key documents and artefacts used across the centre in creating and maintaining relationships between educators and families. These artefacts were developed by the educators to engage with families in response to the VEYLDF, working within FCP. These were an important data set for the study. The documents and artefacts were analysed using an interpretive approach by overlaying the same key themes and ideas used in coding the interview transcripts. The text and visual images in the documents and displays were examined to analyse the extent to which they reflected the key characteristics of the FCP model. This was then overlaid by a further examination of the extent to which the core principles of the model were inherent in the language used in designing and developing the displays and documents. These two overlapping interpretations of the documents and artefacts were then drawn together to find commonalities and differences in the language and imagery as reflecting a partnership framework of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making.

## **7.4 Ethical considerations**

Given that the study included human participants, ethical approval to undertake the research was gained from the university, and the procedures were adhered to relating to obtaining informed consent, confidentiality and storing and storing of transcripts (see Appendices F & G). Along with gaining ethics approval from the university, an application seeking permission to undertake the research was also made to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). It is a requirement of this department to seek approval when undertaking any research in schools or early childhood education and care settings in Victoria. This application was subsequently approved (Appendix H). It was only after receiving approval for both these submissions that the centre and the potential participants were approached.

This chapter outlines the methodology and research design that has shaped the study, positioning the study within a constructivist paradigm and exploring symbolic interactionism as a perceptive through which to view the findings. The chapter goes on to discuss the research design, outlining the reasons behind the choice of qualitative case study as a methodology, and gives a justification for the use of semi-structured interviews and collection of artefacts as methods to address the research questions. It presents a description of the approach taken in analysing the data. The following chapters introduce the participants and provide an analysis of the findings from listening to their voices in the interviews and examining the written texts they use in engaging with families.

## **Chapter 8 The voices of the participants**

This chapter focuses on exploring the voices of the participants to present the findings derived from the analysis of the interviews with the parents and the educators, and examines the documentation and artefacts used by the centre to engage with families to discover the extent to which these interactions can be described as FCP. The model positions FCP within a broader partnerships framework of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making. In the next two chapters, each participant is introduced to the reader to give a context to their voice by presenting a series of vignettes based on the reflections of the researcher on meeting these individual participants for the first time.

The chapter begins by analysing the interviews as they reflect a framework of partnership.

### **8.1 Partnership framework of mutuality, trust reciprocity and shared decision making**

When analysing the responses of the participants, it became clear that when looking at the interactions as they are determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity, there is a contrast in the nature of the interviews of the parents to that of the educators. While the parents spoke often of trust as being a key component driving the nature of the relationships with the educators, this was not as apparent in the interviews with the educators. What was less obvious in both the interviews of the parents and also those of the educators was a sense of mutuality and reciprocity.

Partnerships have also been described as occurring where there is mutually agreed-on



goals and shared planning and decision making (Davis et al., 2002; Keen, 2007; Kruger et al., 2009). The findings have shown that while the educators perceive themselves to be engaged in shared decision making based on mutually agreed goals, that this is not always the case.

Vignette 1 – Theresa (a parent)

Theresa was a parent I found to be very interesting. She came across as confident and assertive.

She had had two children at the centre. The first, older child, had been diagnosed with having particular learning needs. This child was diagnosed while attending the centre in the toddler room. She spoke of her relationship here as being one of a partnership between herself and the two senior managers, because it had been these two women who had first approached her regarding concerns they had in terms of her son's development. They then worked closely with her through the subsequent referral and diagnosis stage until specialist services had been determined and brought in.

Theresa spoke of the relationship as being a partnership, because she felt that herself and these two managers were partners in designing a specific learning program that was then implemented in the program. She felt that there she was an equal decision maker in the decisions that guided the learning plan, and most particularly, the school transition process. While she did not speak of the emotional turmoil that would have been happening to her during these times, I felt that the support (relational practice in the model of FCP) would have assisted in creating her positive recollections to these relationships

What I found most interesting in this interview was that when she was talking about the partnership and the educators, she did not discuss or mention the educators who had been working with her son daily in the room. Instead, she used general terms like 'the educators at the centre', rather than specifically naming or using reflections relating to individuals. However, when speaking of the two senior staff these two women were referred to by their first names.

The second aspect of my meeting with Theresa arose when she was discussing her second child. She spoke of not having a partnership with the centre because she didn't think she needed one – which gives an insight into her own thinking. She did talk about the educators as being wonderful, and when shown the interview room by her daughter's educator, referred to her as being the 'best and most caring person'. She spoke of 'adoring them just as much'. She saw the partnership differently, because it was here she seemed to be talking in less formal terms – talking about the social aspects of the interviews that she has each day with the staff – but not discussing anyone in specifics as she did when talking about her older son.

I was also struck by a feeling that much of her responses were a result of her own familial upbringing. She used very poignant language to talk about her feelings regarding the relationships with the centre. She said that you need to 'know' the people you are leaving your child with, because you are handing over your children to someone outside the family and want to have the confidence in who they are and that they are going to relate to them as you would. Her family background was European, and she and her husband were the first in her family to leave their children in formal care. She spoke about her own family being apprehensive at first (the boy had been only 17 months when he first commenced at the centre), so I felt that she may have taken a while to build this confidence, and that now it will take some ongoing chipping away before this confidence and trust is eroded.

## **8.1.1 Partnerships – the parents' perspective**

### ***8.1.1.1 Trust***

There was an overwhelming sense in analysing the interviews from the parents that trust featured prominently in the way they all discussed the relationships with the educators. Trust was a key aspect of the how the partnership was described, because each of the parents reflected on the need to trust that the educators would care for and respond to their child in the same way they did. This trust had been built as a result of the way the parents believed the educators (at the room level and in most instances, the organisational level) had responded to the identified needs of them as parents as well as

from observing how these educators responded to their children. For example, Alison spoke of having a sense that if her child was hurt, she would receive the same cuddles she would at home; while Vivienne spoke of how the educators had responded to her interview with them about her child's interest in cooking.

The sense of trust also seems to have come from the interpersonal interactions the parents had with the educators, because they all spoke about getting to know the educators through informal interviews, and through the greetings and the acknowledgement they received. One parent (Alison) spoke frequently of being made to feel that she and her child were 'special' and that every parent was treated this way. Theresa spoke of adoring the educators now as much as she had in the past, and Vivienne spoke of the educators being guides for her and a support system. Vivienne also reflected on the personal support the centre managers provided to her at the time of her marriage breakup, and how they supported her children also through the program, building a sense of trust as a result of these interactions.

Vignette 2 – Vivienne (a parent)

Vivienne struck me as someone who was grieving a loss – the loss of a family friend or close relative. Here was a woman who had shared some of her most intimate and personal family details with people from whom she gained support and entrusted her stories who had now left her (in their leaving the centre), and she no longer had anyone to fill that void.

Vivienne was a woman who had slowly built her own confidence and competence as a result of the relationships she had shared over the years with key people she had come to view as more than just her children's carers. She credited them with empowering her to be the parent she was today and to be empowered as an active decision maker in her child's care and education.

The realisation for her that child care was also about education struck a chord for her, and she now saw herself as a crucial teacher for her child as well as a parent. As a parent, she had a strong sense of how important it had been for her to be acknowledged and respected in her role as parent and in her knowledge and understanding of her own child. I think that the loss of what she felt she had as a parent at the centre really impacted on her own feelings of being empowered, challenging her feelings of mutuality, trust and reciprocity that are key elements of partnership theory.

Her interview, and the essence of her feelings that the relationships were like that of a family, created an overwhelming sense of how her relationship with the centre had evolved and can be described, and it was this I felt that made the loss that she had known more difficult to deal with. While she was grieving the loss of the relationships she had had, she was also reluctant to engage with the new organisational management – blaming the cluster manager for the issues and disharmony that she was feeling. This also created in her a sense of concern for those left behind – because these were her family – and she wanted everything to go back to the way it was, even though she knew this was not possible: ‘I guess it’s just a part of me that’s just a little bit heartbroken for a friend.’

For Vivienne too, the knowledge that at the end of the year she would be moving on from the centre was also for her a bit like moving away from close family – and it was this too that I felt was in some way was contributing to her feelings about the centre: ‘You know, my son leaves the centre at the end of this year, and it’s going to break my heart. It’s terribly painful, you know.’ She was looking for the status quo – I felt that for her change was hard.

Interestingly enough, Sarah’s interview did not seem to reflect the same levels of closeness the other parents presented, and this resulted in a sense that trust had not really shaped the essence of her reflections. Her child was only attending the centre one day a week and she did not speak of the same sense of connection with the educators that the other parents did. There was not a discussion here, as there was with the other

parents, about the educators making her feel special or of them having a co-parenting type role as was evident in the other interviews.

Table 3 outlines the way the parents have discussed trust in the context of the relationships they hold.

**Table 3 Parent reflections of trust in the relationships**

Sarah	<p>I [feel] closer to the qualified, and the carer in the room is of the same culture as me and we have a common language and we talk about [son] and food.</p> <p>He has been stuttering, and I asked them if he does this at child care and they followed this up – it made me reassured.</p>
Vivienne	<p>I credit them for raising my kids, really.</p> <p>They helped me toilet train my kids; they guided me through being a parent; they guided me through everything.</p> <p>I think I've come to really rely on them for knowing if something is wrong with my kids. The interactions have varied; they've varied from being just carers for my kids, to being guides for me as a parent, to being a support system through good and bad times.</p> <p>It felt great to be able to turn around and know that my son loves cooking and they were open to maybe doing a cooking class for him, and that they weren't knocking back my recipe ideas.</p>
Theresa	<p>It's the crèche who were the first to advise us, and had we not had that advice so early, I guess it could have taken us a lot longer to get in health services.</p> <p>The bond between ourselves and the staff here is quite close. They're very helpful and supportive, so I just felt he was a very lucky boy to have this picked up.</p> <p>With [second child] we don't need to [have as much interaction] unless there's anything that comes up, and nothing really has come up. If anything needs to be spoken about... we kind of get the information from the rooms and the staff in the rooms, and we'll kind of work on things with the staff directly in the room.</p> <p>I think the thing that I like the most is that the staff, you know, for each child I guess, they kind of sense what that child needs, what helps them to develop more and gain more confidence and things like that.</p>
Alison	<p>They treated [daughter] as if she was their child really, and that's what I like.</p> <p>She had a big transition from the toddler room to the 3–5 room. That was hard for her, but they were great.</p> <p>I had that trust, and I trusted them fully... even if [S] wasn't looking after [daughter], it was these other people, and they were terrific.</p> <p>They'll let me know if there's been an incident, so I know if she's hurt herself, there'll be an incident report. But she gets the extra cuddles. I know that she gets the cuddles she'd get if she fell over in front of me.</p> <p>You really feel like you're safe – there's that feeling of feeling safe. I go to work and I don't, you know, worry about anything. So that's nice to be able to go to work and feel like that.</p> <p>They have a beautiful journal that they do through the year, and that's just amazing. And that kind of forms a bit of a positive thing too I think, just so you know what she's doing.</p>

The way the centre provided information to families on the program, and the children's activities, also created a sense of trust in the educators, because the parents felt informed about what their child was doing while at the centre. Theresa spoke of having trust that the educators were able to identify and meet her daughter's needs, and Alison spoke of the displays and journals that were at the front of the centre for parents to engage with as a way of gaining trust in the program that her child was involved in. Interestingly, Sarah spoke of how other centres built the relationship with the families, but did not talk about this centre in the same way.

Another centre used to have diaries. I know they are a lot of work but I think they are good. I would love to have this.

She also stated:

I know of another centre that would have interviews with the parents every term or semester. This was good, as it provided a time away from their responsibilities with the children for ten minutes where they could just talk with the parent.

Vignette 3 – Alison (a parent)

Alison was very engaging and personable – agreeing to meet for coffee at a local coffee shop. She agreed to meet me on her day off during the school holidays, happy to have a chat and openly sharing her experiences. She bought me a coffee and we had another one when we finished. There was a sense almost that I was meeting a friend, rather than doing an interview for a research project. Alison, though, brought an almost ambivalence in the way she spoke of her experiences in the interview. On the one hand she is a teacher, and as such, in some respect saw the two centre leaders as her equals – having taught their children in her class, and also in her role as prep teacher working in partnership with the centre on transition programs. But in other ways, as being beholden to them for filling a knowledge gap that she needed to be a more competent parent.

As she said: 'Well, you think you would know, but I don't know. That's the thing, I thought I knew.' She didn't 'know much for the ages between zero and five'.

For Alison it was the sense of feeling special that was so powerful for her – she only had one child – and the sense that the centre made her feel her child was special and loved was what created the affection she held for the educators, enough to follow their suggestions regarding her child – even though she may not have thought her child was ready. The connection with the educators also came at a time for Alison when she was at her most vulnerable – she was a single mother, returning to work when not really ready to leave her child, and whose mother was dying – so the connections that she made with people that she knew in a different guise were supportive for her at this time. As she said: she 'knew she was next door', and so in some respects was leaving her child with her next-door neighbour. The educators made her feel special, and for her, this was an essential element of the nature of her relationships with them. Unlike Vivienne, she did not seem to be grieving the loss of those who had created this sense – because there were others still there who filled this need.

### **8.1.1.2 Respect**

Trust had also been built by developing a respect for the expertise of the educators, in that they were cognisant of child development and parenting. In each of the parent interviews they spoke about how the educators provided advice and expertise in relation to child development, children's learning and parenting ideas, even if the parent's themselves did not feel this was what they were ready to take on board. This deference to their expertise seemed to be part of the respect they felt for the educators. Alison particularly stressed the way she felt respected as a single parent in how the educators did not make her child feel different, leading to the educators gaining her respect. While with Theresa, the educators gained her respect from the way they identified her child's particular needs and then supported her through the diagnosis phase and subsequent development of an individualised program. Vivienne showed

respect for the educators and believed she had been respected by the educators, revealed in the way she spoke about particular interviews she had had with educators regarding her child's learning and interests, particularly when she wanted to introduce writing at home, and again when she spoke of how the educators worked with her in taking on board her child's interest in cooking (mentioned in Table 3). Sarah provided an example of the way the educators interacted with her child to build his communication, and this amazed her. Table 4 provides examples of times when the parents demonstrated their feelings of respect for the educators in the centre.

**Table 4 Parents' demonstration of respect for educators**

Sarah	<p>She got him talking and I was amazed and asked her how she did this. She said she got down to him and got him to answer her. I was shocked and pleased.</p> <p>They take the time to tell me what he has done, [what he has] played with... who he has played with.</p> <p>They respect me and are respectful. They make me aware.</p>
Vivienne	<p>They taught me.... My oldest... she got very upset at about the age of four, because she wanted to learn how to read, and it's like 'Okay, well, do I teach her how to read?' And they were like, 'Well, no, have you taught her basic concepts of under/over, up/down?'</p> <p>I guess they've taught me that, you know, that even children of that age, can learn.</p> <p>They've understood what kids needed, they've understood what parents needed, they've understood the position that parents have been in.</p>
Theresa	<p>I need to know the staff – not that I need to know everything about them specifically – but I need to feel that they are there for the right reasons.</p> <p>Because this is like, dropping off your kids at a family, that's the only time you would do this, when you would leave your children for that amount of hours.</p> <p>Probably because of the respect as well that we have for each other, and the way we interact and talk about the children, it does sound like a partnership.</p> <p>I've just always felt they've done it because they've wanted to; they've treated him like their own child. It's never felt like it was a chore. They've come up with ideas that I didn't even think of, I wouldn't have even asked.</p>
Alison	<p>They always ask for a photo at the start of the year of [each child's] family. I think it was me and our dog and [my daughter]... Because she knows she doesn't have a daddy and she'll say that, and they've asked her and she'll say, 'No, I don't have one'. And I think they reinforce that that's okay as well.</p>



### ***8.1.1.3 Mutuality and reciprocity***

The elements of mutuality and reciprocity were not strongly evident in the analysis of the parent interviews. Mutuality and reciprocity are terms that denote a sense of sharing and commonality that can be seen in both members of a partnership; however, in terms of how the parents presented an essence of mutuality and reciprocity, this was more difficult to identify clearly. The essence of mutuality and reciprocity was shown in the way Alison spoke of how the educators could share and have a joke with parents, and know which ones could joke and how far to go. To her, this was a reciprocal relationship based on mutual trust and respect. Sarah also spoke of this, when she reflected that she made her child ready for the educators and they in turn made him ready for her. Theresa mentioned the social aspects of the relationship, and these were key to her presenting a sense of mutuality in the relationships, while Vivienne mentioned incidences where she and educators shared information on the program and on child development. Table 5 gives examples of the interviews where mutuality and reciprocity were seen in the way the educators interacted with the parents.

**Table 5 Examples of mutuality and reciprocity as shown by the parents**

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Sarah	They usually say things like ‘How are you?’ or things concerning my son at home, or I ask them questions about my son. They notice me and say hi. They ask [son] how he is and talk about his day. I need to inform them and they need to inform me. I make my child ready for them, and they make my child ready for me. It has to be both ways – parents need to put in the effort.
Vivienne	I felt like we were asked for our feedback on a regular basis, which was great. I felt like our feedback was welcomed, I felt like we were listened to. They didn’t ask me, but when I sort of came up with some suggestions and some recipes, it wasn’t knocked back, it was thanked – thanks for helping them out because they were really struggling. I want them to feel comfortable, to be able to approach me, to be able to ask any question about my son, and I want to feel comfortable to be able to tell them any information about my son, so that they can deal with my son easily.
Theresa	With [daughter] it is a bit of a more simpler routine... if anything comes up (which is not very often), we’ll discuss it and it’s kind of worked out within a week or two.

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We do talk socially about things outside the centre, and what our family's doing and what they're doing and if they've been on a holiday.

I like to stop and chat with the girls as well... about their day as well. It's not all just about the kids or about us. It's nice to... say 'Had a good day?' It's nice to have that connection.

We'll talk about it as if we're both their parent, kind of thing, so we'll kind of hand over some information.

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Alison I think we have similar beliefs.

I brought her in with the wet-weather plastic shoes on and they laughed, some of the carers. So I just think having that, I know they know her, and they know me.

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#### ***8.1.1.4 Changes to centre management, and the influence this had on the nature of the partnership***

This sense of trust, respect and mutuality diminished with the change of management.

While Sarah had been interviewed prior to the management changes, the other three parents were all interviewed after the centre managers had both left the service. In analysing the interviews, it became apparent that both Vivienne and Alison felt that the relationships were not the same when the two managers left. Vivienne in particular felt a sense of loss of trust with new management coming into the centre, leading her to feeling that the trust and respect she had felt in the past was now more tenuous. She did not have the same sense of mutuality with the staff that she had had previously, and identified that she no longer felt comfortable or had the same sense of ease as she did previously. This diminishing of trust and respect was influenced by the way her child was responding, and Vivienne said that she needed him to get his discipline back, and that she no longer felt informed about what was happening with him at the centre. She said that she believed that the educators had 'given up' on the centre, leading to a diminishing of her sense of respect and mutuality, and the shared understanding she had had was no longer there. Alison also noted that the relationship felt different. She felt her child responded differently since the managers had left, and there were several

changes of staff as a result. However, she seemed to reflect more of a level of concern for the remaining educators, because she had had such a close bond with them, rather than a loss of trust.

Vignette 4 – Sarah (a parent)

While with Alison, you felt you were catching up with a friend, with Sarah, the interactions were almost clinical. While it is not really accurate to say she was distant, or that she put up barriers, there was not the sense of finding a new best friend as there was with Alison.

Sarah was friendly enough – happily agreeing to meet at her house for the interview. The interview with Sarah was the first one undertaken for the study. She responded immediately after receiving the information, saying that her reason for agreeing to participate was that she was studying psychology herself at university and knew how hard it was to get participants for research projects, hoping that someone would do the same for her. There was very much a sense of the relationship being that of researcher and participant.

A young Turkish mother in her mid-twenties, Sarah had two children. Her oldest son had just finished at the centre where he only attended one day week – he had only been there for about 18 months – and her second son was yet to start. Mostly, the boys were cared for by grandparents while Sarah was at classes or studying, and she didn't really connect with the centre – coming across as quite distant and clinical in her responses. Interestingly, Sarah had some experience in working in child care, and it was from this lens that she seemed to be focusing her responses – not from how she as a parent had felt about the centre, but how the centre reflected what she had experienced herself in her role as an educator, drawing in examples of the way other centres did things differently from that of the study centre.

In some ways, her responses presented as someone looking through a window – rather than as a lived experience – which was noticeably different when she spoke about having shared a recipe with the cook, but not knowing if it had every been made for the children.

I got the impression that this was also the nature of her engagement with the educators: not naming any of them personally, discussing them in terms of role such as ‘the cook’. There certainly was not the same sense of the educators being part of a large extended family that was very present in the reflections of the other three parents.

Theresa may have had the closest relationship with the centre managers. She had worked closely with them during the time her son was diagnosed with his specific learning needs, and in relation to seeking additional support services. She had spoken of a strong sense of trust and respect for these two educators:

M and S, they were both very approachable, and I think they had a good way of... expressing themselves to us as well, to not scare us off, because... parents can get their back up and not worry about going somewhere to get it diagnosed.

The lines of communication between her and the educators caring for her son were:

coming through M and S to work things out to then filter through to the staff.’

However, Theresa spoke the least about how the changes to the management had affected her sense of mutuality, trust and reciprocity, instead accepting that staff changes were sad, but were to be expected. Table 6 outlines the feelings of the parents as they discussed the influences that the changes to the centre had on their feelings of partnership.

**Table 6 Influences of the changes to the centre on the nature of the relationships**

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Vivienne	<p>Now they've just let the whole thing go, you don't see them partaking in it anymore, you don't see them caring anymore. And I feel like they've let the whole relationship go with the parents now, and... the parents just don't care anymore themselves.</p> <p>I need my son to see that he's getting that discipline back. I need to see that he's getting that learning back, I need to see that he's getting that stable environment back.</p> <p>It's just become a child care centre. It's just become a place where parents just drop off their kids off and leave.</p> <p>How do we, as parents, feel like we can have a say or can have any involvement in the centre, in our child's life, if the centre management itself can't get it right?</p> <p>I would like to hear from them what their future plans or their intentions are for the centre... how they feel they're going to turn the centre around, how's it going to benefit my son, how's it going to benefit me as a parent.</p> <p>When you keep me out of the loop, I kind of get a bit antsy.</p> <p>When you see a centre that you've been a part of for six years, they do almost become family, and you know, your heart does get broken when you start seeing it fall apart.</p> <p>Whereas now, it's like I never hear about any activities they're doing in the class, I never know, I don't know. And that's sad.</p>
Theresa	<p>We've had a few staff over the last year I think leave us, but you know, staff move on, that's in every job. So it's kind of hard when you've got to say goodbye to someone that you feel like is family.</p>
Alison	<p>I think they've had to be supportive considering what's happened at the top, and I think that's been hard on them, and that's a big concern for me too because I've noticed a couple of changes, because I knew the girls as well.</p> <p>There were a lot of changes in [daughter's] room and at one stage she was probably a little bit ratty.</p> <p>And I know that they were trying, that they moved some people back in, they moved some people around, and then it changed. And I think she's a lot more settled again. But you could just tell, probably a couple weeks when she seemed a bit tireder, and I don't know what was happening, but now she comes out very happy.</p> <p>I was a little bit concerned, but I think I got the vibe that [daughter] was okay, so if [she] was happy and okay, then I'm fine.</p>

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## **8.1.2 Partnerships – the educator perspective**

### ***8.1.2.1 Mutuality, trust, reciprocity***

While all of the educators spoke of having respectful relationships with the families, the characteristics of mutuality, trust and reciprocity were less evident throughout all interviews. Each of the educators saw the relationships with families as a key part of their role, but all identified that these did not always look the same or were not always reciprocated. Trust was a characteristic that was rarely discussed in the interviews of

the educators, and there was an inherent feel throughout that trust was evidenced more with families not trusting them, which had dictated the way the educators discussed the relationships with families in terms of the elements of partnership.

Kylie made a clear distinction between those families she believed she had a partnership with and those she saw as just having a relationship with, although she spoke in terms of having ‘respectful relationships’. It was important to her that she did have these respectful relationships with all families. When speaking about the parents with whom she felt she had a partnership she used terms such as ‘team’ and ‘friendship’. In contrast, she described many families as ‘just having a relationship’ (as opposed to a partnership), and with these families she felt there was less ‘trust and respect’ and about having some uncertainty about how they might react to her.

Vignette 5 – Kylie (an educator)

Of all the educators, Kylie was the one who left the most lasting impression. She was inspirational in that she was so confident in her own sense of being and her own identity. Kylie was an exact contrast to Suzy. While they had much in common, they were also in many ways miles apart. Kylie and Suzy were the same age – both were twenty-two, but where Suzy came across as timid and vulnerable, Kylie presented a confidence and self-assurance that in many ways was beyond her years.

Kylie was able to draw and reflect on her past experiences and life circumstances to identify and explain who she was today. Dropping out of school in Year 11 and caring for her unwell mother, she started working as an untrained assistant in child care, travelling by public transport across town to the other side of Melbourne every Saturday to undertake her certificate-level training. When this was completed, she then began her diploma-level studies, doing this while working full time in the child care centre.

This life experience she attributes to what she felt she brought to her work with families: ‘That had a lot to do with how interact with families. So I’ve had the experience of dealing with those difficult emotional situations, which influence the way I interact with families a lot.’ This sense of self-efficacy that had also contributed to how she saw the relationships she has with families – not seeing them as scary or bullies – but in commanding respect and acknowledgement for her skills and expertise in caring for their children.

Kylie had recently been elevated into a leadership position at the centre – an achievement of which she was understandably proud. ‘It hasn’t taken me long to go from co-worker down in the toddler’s room, to now I’m acting 2IC.’ This was testament to the strength and purpose that she brought to her role.

Susie spoke of having connections with families, and when she had formed a connection that she felt more trusting of the families in these relationships, or trusted by them. She also spoke of being uncertain how some families, with whom she felt she did not have a connection, might react to her. She spoke of having a ‘friendship’ with some families, those that she felt she had connected with and who she saw as having opened up to her. For those families she felt she had not connected with there was a real feeling that these families were ‘scary’, ‘angry’ or ‘intimidating’. It could be argued that since these families were described in this way that these would not be trusting relationships as they relate to partnership. Like Susie, Maria too, spoke of those families with whom she was not able to connect, or of parents she did not have as trusting a relationship with, because they were ‘more demanding’ or critical. Maria did reflect, however, that she ‘always puts (her)self into their shoes’, which does lend itself to suggestions of mutuality, and she identified that it was better for children and families if they had a sense of trust with her.

A partnership framework, building on elements of mutuality, trust and reciprocity, did not seem to be present at all in the interview with Alina. She did speak of wanting to make the parents feel they belonged, and that their concerns and opinions mattered. She also spoke about being on the same level with their families because they were both caring for the same child. Alina saw herself as working hard at building relationships with the families, but went on to discuss this more in terms of ensuring the program ran smoothly. She too spoke of families with whom she felt did not want to form a relationship, and of families who made demands of the educators, or treated them as babysitters.

Connie presented trust as the key issue in her interviews with families. She identified that having the families trust the educators was essential in driving the nature of the interactions. Her interview was about the trust that families had with her, or recognising that families needed time to build the trust. She fostered this by recognising the similarities she had with the lives of the families and allowing for them to feel anxious when leaving their child for the first time.

Rosa's interview was positioned within a stance of mutuality. While trust was not as explicit, Rosa clearly felt she was trusting and had trusted relationships with the families across the service. She spoke of putting herself in the position of the families, and of thinking about how she as a parent would feel in similar circumstances. Rosa saw herself as a 'second mum' to the children in her care and she felt this had enabled her to form a bond with families where they became like an extended family to her.

Table 7 gives examples from the interviews of each of the educators to demonstrate the way they present mutuality, trust and reciprocity.



**Table 7 The educators reflections of mutuality, trust and reciprocity**

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Kylie	<p>There's still a certain degree of trust and respect but it doesn't come out... There are a few families that I have a friendship with, those parents whose children I've cared for for a very long time.</p> <p>There are families I have got a professional relationship that's still trusting and respectful, but doesn't overlap to that certain degree.</p> <p>There are families that I'll have relationships with that do have that whole, I don't know, you have my child, you're going to care for them for a day, then I'm going to take them home.</p> <p>But in terms of having a partnership, it goes that little bit further I think... you're working more as a team, opposed to someone who's caring for my child.</p> <p>The main thing is to have those respectful relationships. You're not going to get anywhere with a family unless you have the [foundations] of a relationship.</p>
Susie	<p>I think sometimes because you haven't formed that friendship or that connection with them, so when you have to bring up issues with them, it's a bit harder because you don't know their personality, or how they're gonna take it or react.</p> <p>I think it's their willingness to open up to me. Like if a parent... doesn't come in and sort of say hello, or anything like that, they just walk and sign in and that... I try and make conversation. But if I don't feel they're wanting to talk back to me, then I suppose that's where the connection doesn't really happen.</p> <p>[Some parents] stay around and you get to know them... you talk about your home life together, and that kind of thing, and you sort of know how their family works.</p> <p>I think because they come across a bit as if they don't want to talk to you, you kind of shy away and I suppose it is intimidating as well.</p>
Maria	<p>If they feel comfortable, if they trust me, it's better for their lives and the child's lives too.</p> <p>Some families asking more questions, of course they're all the same. If they ask me more, I'll help them more, of course.</p> <p>Some parents just drop the child off and then leave. So I have to treat them differently.</p> <p>This family, whatever I did, she didn't like me, you know? So I was greeting her in the morning, she was ignoring me, and when she brought her child she used to wait for another staff member to come in, like she didn't trust leaving him with me... I [tried] everything to develop a relationship with her, but she didn't want to.</p> <p>This is part of my role: to develop good relationships with families.</p> <p>Every morning we listen, of course, 'This has happened at home, I want my child to have a t-shirt by ten o'clock...' They just ask us to do it. Of course we follow.</p> <p>They think 'I bring my child to a centre, so I want the best for my child. If it's not, I can follow up, I can go and make them work better'.</p> <p>I always put myself into their shoes.</p>
Rosa	<p>I'm a family, I'm a parent, I'm a mother, so when I think about it, I want them to talk to me... I put myself into their shoes first. Most of the parents are happy that I am a mum.</p> <p>The families that are having a hard time, I talk to them, become friends, you know, give them advice if they want to.</p> <p>Even talking about their day when they come and pick them up, 'Oh how was your day?', and they love talking in the afternoon because they don't have time in the morning... I always give them time and stay there.</p> <p>With their children, you know... we have them five days a week, and they become like your own, and their family is your family.</p> <p>Like, I see myself like a second mum. And that means we are a partnership with their families, especially with mums.</p>

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Well, some parents think that 'I'm paying for this'. They have to be looked after.	
Some parents don't even care what you do, you know, just walk in, walk to the sign in and out book, get their children, and 'Goodbye, see you tomorrow'. And that's it, you can't get more relationship, more partnership with them.	

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Alina	<p>I just answer the questions they want to know, and how their day went, and if any issues come up during the day.</p> <p>Because we're looking after the same child. We're both looking out for what's good for the... the parents' child, so I think we need to have the same level.</p> <p>Sometimes I feel they treat us as a babysitter and just do what they say. Some parents.</p> <p>We work hard towards building a relationship with the families, so that the room runs smoothly and the children are happy and we're all happy.</p> <p>You make the parents feel they belong, they belong in the centre, their concerns matter and their opinion matters.</p>
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Connie	<p>The partnership is with them and their children, but the relationship should be ongoing every day, and you build up that conversation and friendship and trust.</p> <p>I sometimes think they find it hard to leave their children. It's not really a personal thing. It's just getting that trust and feeling like they can leave their children every day.</p> <p>I know how hard it is, so if you show the families that... we're all human, we're all part of the community, and we're all friends, and we try and go out of our way.</p> <p>I try, you know, you try. But some [are] gonna be more than others. And that's not personal anyway. And, yeah, the bond's gotta be a little bit different with certain parents.</p> <p>Respect, and just open communication, so they feel they're able to ring and talk to us about anything.</p> <p>Until you form that trust and that friendship with them, families might... come across as a little bit, you know, aggressive sometimes, or a little bit demanding.</p>
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## 8.2 Mutually agreed goals and shared decision making in a partnership

The discussion around the matters of mutuality and reciprocity led further into a deeper analysis of the reflections of the way the parents and the educators engage in determining mutually agreed goals and shared decision making. These are also key characteristics of a partnership. Engaging in shared decision making and mutually determining goals presents an essence of mutuality and reciprocity that can be further explored because it relates to both the parents and the educators. Here, too, there was a contrast in the interviews with the parents to those of the educators when examining the way they discussed their interactions with one another in determining the goals for their

children and also in sharing decision making. While the parents spoke of being involved in decision making and determining goals, the extent to which this could be described as mutual and shared could be contestable.

### **8.2.1 Mutually agreed goals and shared decision making as presented by the parents**

If partnership is to be viewed through a lens where there are mutually agreed goals and shared decision making, the parent interviews reveal conflicting findings. In all examples the parents said that they believed that they had been included as shared decision makers in relation to their children. However, on closer analysis, with each of the parent interviews, at times decisions appeared to have been made by the educators and then parents were advised. There are several clear examples when parents said that they felt they had been involved in shared decision making. These mostly came from Sarah, who commented that:

He has been stuttering, and I asked them if he does this at child care and they followed this up [and later stated] I told his caregiver once that he was interested in using the scissors and she started using the scissors with him at the centre.

Theresa also reflected:

We'll talk about it as if we're both their parent kind of thing, so we'll kind of hand over some information [and later] I never felt that I was made to feel that I couldn't have a say.

This, it could be argued, is evidence of her engaging in mutually agreed goals and shared decision making.

Alison mentioned that in regard to the decision to wean her child off her pacifier, that she thought:

it was mutual, I was concerned about her having a dummy all the time [and that the educators] want us to bring things in that we've been doing at home, so they can then bring them into the centre.

However, while the parents believed they were sharing the decision making, there were other examples of instances where the decisions for their child were made despite the concerns that parents held. With three of the parents, issues of toilet training were presented, and both Theresa and Vivienne felt that while their child was not ready to be toilet trained or that it was not the right time, the educators advised them that this was the right thing to do. Alison believed that she personally was not ready, because she was grieving about the death of her mother, but the educators took the lead in advising that they felt it needed to start.

There were other times during the interviews that provide an indication that while the parents believed they were sharing in the decision making, the decisions had in fact been made without them indeed participating as an equal partner. Theresa spoke of being surprised when the educators brought in a specialist to advise them about her child; however, she did believe that she was a key decision maker in the development of the program provided to her child and determining the next phases of his education. When Theresa was asked what would happen if she disagreed with a decision made at the centre if she felt it may not be in the best interests of her son, her response was that the educators would raise it and then discuss it with her.

Sarah felt that she had never really been asked for her input, but when she had shared some recipes with the cook that she was told they would 'get around to it [using them]'. Vivienne, while wanting to teach her child to read, was advised that this was not really

appropriate, and she needed to teach her to understand basic spatial concepts. Table 8 provides examples of the way each of the parents discussed shared decision making and having mutually agreed goals.

**Table 8 Parents discussion on shared decision making and mutually agreed goals.**

Sarah	<p>I get more information and they are giving me more knowledge.          [They have] not really ask for my input – there is a suggestion box.          They share the information that parents want to know and like to know.          I could do more of sharing my information – I have a quiet personality. They could pick up on his home interests – I would be happy about this.          I have given them some recipes, but when I ask if they have used them they say they will get around to it.</p>
Vivienne	<p>They taught me with my first one how to get a child into a routine, and the importance of having a child in a routine.          My oldest, you know she got very upset at about the age of four, because she wanted to learn how to read, and it's like 'Okay, well do I teach her how to read?' And they were like, 'Well, no, have you taught her basic concepts of under/over, up/down?'          You could always give your feedback, never took offence at anything, she always listened. Whether she implemented what you offered or not, it always felt like she could get on board.          They weren't afraid to tell me what was going on in the centre; they weren't afraid to tell me about the curriculum; they weren't afraid to tell me what was going on in the world as far as 'This is the activity we're doing next week'.          They didn't ask me, but when I sort of came up with some suggestions and some recipes, it wasn't knocked back, it was thanked.          Whereas now, it's like I never hear about any activities they're doing in the class, I never know, I don't know.          I want them to feel comfortable, to be able to approach me, to be able to ask any question about my son, and I want to feel comfortable to be able to tell them any information about my son.</p>
Theresa	<p>It came down to even eating, playing, sleeping, everything had to be spoken about and worked out, and with each of the carers.          We were quite surprised because at one point they had introduced... a health person extra.          Sometimes there've been occasions where [we] might not have agreed on things, or... something that might have happened, that we might not have agreed on how it was handled.          Toilet training, that's something they put on us to... to have to do. And sometimes you might not feel that your child's ready because children take... different... times. Not everyone can just get toilet training as soon as they turn three or whatever it is.          Usually in our interview they'll just bring it up. So they would discuss it, you know. You'd have a chance to express yourself.</p>
Alison	<p>With the toilet training, they were the ones who encouraged me it was time. I had to start it off. They kept saying 'You have to start it off'.          I said I couldn't handle it. They wanted to try and toilet train her while they thought she was ready. I know she was showing the signs, but I wasn't ready.</p>

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I don't think she was quite ready. She had the signs, but she'd wet herself and then sit on the toilet, all sorts of things, so to me she wasn't making that connection. They weaned her off the dummy [pacifier] during the day so she has one at night. I think it was mutual. I was concerned about her having a dummy all the time, too, because she's quite partial to the dummy... I was wanting it but they encouraged it.

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### **8.2.3 Mutually agreed goals and shared decision making as presented by the educators**

Each parent identified ways that they believed they had been participants in the setting of mutually agreed goals and shared decision making, even though it appears that at times, the extent to which this was in fact mutual is questionable. When analysing the interviews of the educators, the sharing of decision making and the setting of mutually agreed goals becomes even less apparent. While there was discussion that focused on sharing of information, there was little discussion that indicated that the educators engaged in shared decision making. Kylie identified parents with whom she felt she had a partnership and with whom she saw herself as being part of a team. With these families she seemed to engage more in sharing of information in a more mutual way, because she saw these families as being approachable; however, this does not really reflect a sharing of decision making.

FCP findings are discussed in depth in the following section; however, it is important to note that Kylie identified that this approach involved 'recognising what the family want and what they require from us, and being able to work around that, or with them, to accomplish the same goals', so it could be argued that this is how she viewed her own practice in the way she engaged in shared decision making and the designing of mutually agreed goals.

#### Vignette 6 – Susie (an educator)

Susie was an educator that I remember well as she struck me as someone who was quite defenceless and felt quite scared to put herself ‘out there’. I found my time with her brought out several competing thoughts and reflections. She was the educator participant with the least experience – having only been at the centre for three years, and working before that only for a few months, but was also the educator with the highest level of qualification and training – being the only one studying at degree level. She was only 22 years old, the youngest in the study, and unlike the other educators in the study, was the only one who had completed her diploma through classroom-based study, rather than through workplace learning on ‘on the job’, but now was working towards her degree-level teaching qualification by studying part time while she worked. She was working as a room leader, so had a level of leadership in the centre, but throughout the interview, I kept getting a sense that she was seeking validation that what she was saying was credible. Interestingly, although she was in this position, she was not given a role in the leadership team within the centre.

Suzy showed quite a lot of ‘reverence’ towards the centre manager, and spoke about having taken on casual work just so she could work at this centre, with this director. But this also showed a certain level of low emotional confidence, because she seemed to be seeking validation for her skills and knowledge. This was also evident in the second visit I made to the centre, when she really wanted to show me the way she had set up her room – seeking feedback on what I thought about it from my perspective as an expert in the field.

This sense of needing validation and lack of confidence also showed when she spoke about the relationship with the families. Like with Alina, there was this sense of wariness, and one got the sense she was putting up the shutters. She used words like describing some parents as scary, and intimidating, showing a real sense of feeling undervalued in her role and for her expertise, that she felt she had gained from her training. She came across as this timid, naïve young woman. She had less life skills on which to draw, and therefore had less personal strength, and she appeared to be frightened of some of the parents, not knowing how to form a relationship with them.

If the relationship with parents for her was not working she backed away: 'Like I said before, if they're sort of unwilling to talk to me, then I sort of feel like maybe I'm being too pushy or something. So I suppose you sort of back away.' Rather than working through the issues, or as with Connie, empathising with where the parent may be at. She spoke of being treated as a babysitter, or parents not valuing her knowledge and of not taking on board her making comments, such as, 'I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time, they don't want to talk to you', which showed an interesting insight into her own emotional intelligence. She also felt they were judging her because of her age, and that they did not have confidence in her. However, when she did have the confidence and the trust in the parents she was able to share common interests and spoke more animatedly of these relationships.

While Susie did mention sharing the same goals as the parents, she did not go on to speak of sharing the decision making at all with the families. Her interviews focused on seeking information from families that could inform her own planning for the children. There was not a sense that the parents were included as shared decision makers in this process. She did mention seeking parents' input into ideas for the room, but did not elaborate on what this might encompass. Like Susie, Maria also spoke of seeking information from families and of sharing information with parents. She did, however, speak of wanting to know parents' expectations and wishes in relation to planning children's routines, especially with the younger infants and toddlers. There were times when she saw herself as following the goals of the families, even though she might not have seen them as fitting with her own views.

In contrast, Rosa presented as engaging in mutual relationships, yet there were no examples from her negotiations in the centre that evidenced her engaging in shared decision making. There were times when the family had been involved in agreeing with goals identified by Rosa, such as maintaining home language and learning words from



the child's home language, but these goals were offered to the family by Rosa and did not appear to arise from shared discussion. As with Rosa, Connie also did not demonstrate any incidents where it could be said she had engaged in shared decision making or mutually established goals with the families. Her interview mostly centred on providing information to families to support them as parents and engaging with them to gain insight into their child's learning and involvement in the program.

Alina's interview also did not reveal any indication that she engaged in shared decision making. She spoke of 'toilet training' in relation to decision making with families. She saw this in terms of families not following through with a goal and decision that had been mutually agreed on; however, after further questioning she did agree that the decision to toilet train this particular child might *not* have been mutual. Interestingly, even though she had agreed that the goal was not mutually agreed, she still felt that the parents should follow her decision, reinforcing an argument that shared decision making is not a practice that Alina readily engaged in. Table 9 presents examples that are indicative of the interviews of the educators that relate to the sharing of decision making and the mutual determining of goals.

**Table 9 Educators discussion relating to shared decision making and mutually agreed goals**

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Kylie	There are families who I have a partnership with, and they'll call me and say 'Look, I did this on the weekend, you want to maybe do something with so-and-so today?' That to me is more of a partnership. It's much easier on the family and on me, and on the child, in terms of if something happens, or I need to speak to them about something, or I have concerns... to go up to a parent of a child that I've had for many years and have a good relationship with and say, 'I'm a little bit worried about this, what do you think?' They come, and they talk, and they'll have a chat, they'll drop off their children.
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There's parents that I [am] very close with, will come to me for advice and to chat and to get my opinion. Whereas the parents that I don't have those strong partnerships with will still do things like, you know, 'This wasn't done much, my child didn't...' I don't tend to have those kind of issues with those families that I have those strong partnerships with.

I would take family-centred practice as recognising what the family wants and what they require from us, and being able to work around that, or with them, to accomplish the same goals.

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Susie You can learn more about the child and their background, because it's easier to plan and stuff because... 'Well they've gone to grandma's on the weekend, or they ride horses, or...'

You find out things by talking to them, and some of the families talk to their child in Greek or stuff like that, so we might try and learn, to get them to try to write down a few words, and we're learning some Turkish words or some Greek words.

Just through what parents have told me I've been able to plan through that.

A partnership would just sort of be working towards the same goal, maybe? Like towards, for instance, if a child is biting to stop biting, or something like that.

They stay around and you get to know them, that you talk about your home life together, and that kind of thing, and you sort of know how their family works.

A few parents have said, 'So when are you gonna teach them the ABC?' And like, we explain to them, we're a play-based program and stuff like that.

We put out a letter with the newsletter saying we need ideas for our room or if you want to help.

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Maria If they need anything any time, they can ask or they can share their child's life, like their routines and their children's needs and interests with me. I always ask questions about the children's needs and interests.

I ask always when I greet them, 'How was last night, how was the child?' Especially babies' room: 'Did she sleep well, did she eat well?' So I can follow up.

I think they want to share with someone... the families. I listen.

So when we make the routines we always ask the parents how they want it, what's the child doing at home.

Every morning we listen, of course, 'This has happened at home, I want my child to have a t-shirt by ten o'clock...' They just ask us to do it. Of course we follow.

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Rosa Look, I'll speak Turkish to children that are mine, because when they go to school they quickly forget the English.

And I'm still trying to get the words from them, to teach their children their language.

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Alina One lady has a baby, and he's an only child, and she wants us to do the same thing. But because she's just only got him at home... to me it looks like it's stopping her from growing.

When we try to explain to her, leave him without a nappy and he'll get used to getting wet, but she doesn't want to him get wet... When she leaves the centre she'll tell us to put a nappy on him.

It's just she wants, she wants wake up to herself. For him to grow, he's got to learn this way.

She wants him to be potty trained, and we give her our advice and she follows it for a while, and then she goes back to the old way, and I don't know why.

Interviewer: So you think that deep down she doesn't want to toilet train him?

Response: That's what I'm thinking. He's gonna be at kinder, you know, and she calls him a big boy and all of that, but sometimes it feels like she just wants to keep him little.

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Connie Anything you want to offer or join in anything, if you want to come and read a story in group time, if you want to come and help cook in our centre, anything that you can suggest with our program that will help your child, you know, integrate into our room and feel comfortable, is fantastic.

It's always that reassuring the parent, like if there's an incident and I would say to the parent, 'Look, we're documenting decisions, we ring you up'.

And all year we're toileting kids, toddlers are quite demanding and we have to seem professional, we have to know toileting, and psychology, and know and understand their customs.

It's a constant trying to persuade parents that children need to get dirty, need to get wet, need to play with sensory things.

So we try and teach them that it's not to do with culture, it's to do with independence – you're trying to build their independence.

In one way we're talking more, you know, about the new curriculum, but some families just want to know if their children have had a good day.

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### **8.3 Interactions between parents and educators as they reflect family-centred practice**

The analysis of the interviews reflects a broad partnership framework and led to a deeper analysis of how the relationships mirror the core principles and characteristics of FCP. This model is fundamental to the expected practice of the educators. The following section analyses the interviews of both the parents and the educators to examine the extent to which the centre can be seen as working within this FCP model.

#### **8.3.1 Educators understanding of family-centred practice**

The centre being examined in this study participated in the trial and validation of the VEYLDF *prior* to it being released for implementation more widely across Victoria. As a participant in this process, we may assume that the educators across the service would have an understanding of the practice and philosophy of FCP as a model of partnership, and were in some way working within this approach. The educators were all asked to reflect on their understanding of FCP, and whether they felt that this was practice enacted across the service. All six of the educators believed that they were

working within the model of FCP. Table 10 presents the responses from each of the educators when they were asked what they understood family-centred practice to be.

While the educators all said that they believed they were enacting the model in practice, their responses indicate that they did not all understand what the practice should look like. Elements of the model were present in the responses of Kylie, Susie, Alina and Connie, who demonstrated some level of awareness of the family as being pivotal in the lives of their children; however, neither Maria nor Rosa explicitly outlined this understanding. As a group, the educators did not really show an awareness of how FCP would be inherent in their practice.

**Table 10 Educators understanding of FCP**

Kylie	I would take family-centred practice as recognising what the family want and what they require from us, and being able to work around that, or with them, to accomplish the same goals.
Susie	Well, what we do here, like inclusion of all families, so like the different types of families, also suiting the families' and the children's needs.
Maria	We follow the accreditation, follow the points in the accreditation. Also, our centre policy is to develop a good relationship with families too.
Rosa	I don't know. At every child care it should be the same, just one centre... this is our centre, and this is a multicultural centre, and other centres, private centres, it's not the same as what we're doing here... We've got learning journeys, learning about stories. They're all new and I'm still struggling with those questions and it's hard to answer them.
Alina	Bringing in the families in to feel comfortable in our setting, like it's a home away from home and their children are safe, where we're going to carry on from them when they've left them behind here, when they've left them here. I just think getting the families all involved with how we run things here, how we look after their children.
Connie	The families are included in our service, as in the curriculum, they're included in all our special days, every day. And it's the way we speak to them, and making sure that they're given plenty of notice for things. We have newsletters, which we email now, and we have notices, and in our rooms we might talk to parents and remind them about certain things.

The findings show that Kylie had a level of awareness of FCP, because she spoke of working with families in goal setting and finding out family expectations; however,

none of the other educators demonstrated this sense of mutuality. There was a sense of including families expressed by Susie, Alina and Connie; although for Connie, inclusion was about enabling families to participate in special days, rather than as having any mutual role in decision making. Rosa and Maria appeared to struggle with an understanding of what FCP actually entailed, seeing it as something that they had to do to meet the regulatory requirements.

Vignette 7 – Alina (an educator)

What first struck me about Alina, and the term that first comes to mind is ‘wary’. But there was also a touch of superiority, of believing that she knew better! I kept thinking that she wanted to make sure she said the right thing. I think it was the way she sat – sort of closed and hunched up, softly spoken, yet proud. She had two roles in the centre. She appeared to identify most as the integration aide – funded through Commonwealth grants to work specifically with the children who had additional learning needs attending the centre. She spoke of her relationship with the families – it was the parents of these children that she could speak about: ‘The parents of my special needs children I have a stronger connection with.’ When she was the integration support she was there for the special needs children. She really enjoyed this aspect of her role and it gave meaning to her work: ‘I really like working with them, it makes me feel like I’ve done a day’s work, you know helping them, it’s my favourite thing.’ The other days when they weren’t there she was an assistant in the room and didn’t need to have the same sense of connection with the parents.

When I asked her about the interactions she had with families, she spoke from a sense of authority, of having a moral code from which she examined the parents. She spoke of having guidelines and codes of ethics, and of there being policies, and of having different morals. However, she did tell me that she thought of how she as a mother would want the person caring for her children to be interacting with her, but her expectations were that the parents should parent as she did.

She also was an educator in her 40s who had come from Turkey, but unlike Rosa, who had invited me into her life, I left feeling I did not really know much about who Alina was. I do know that she had a certificate qualification and that she had been at the centre for six years. I also know that she had worked before that as an assistant in a kindergarten where she started when her children attended. When I asked her to think about some of the relationships she had with families, she reflected that maybe some families found her too forward. This was interesting, because she came across to me as someone who had a firm belief, and values as to how to bring up children, and if parents did not follow her then they were in the wrong.

If parents did not do as she said, then the parents were undermining her – the parents had the power. She was quite intimidated by some parents – she got someone else to talk to them.

Because the educators struggled to articulate clearly their understanding of FCP, the interviews with both the parents and the educators were further analysed to gain insight into whether the model was being implemented by the educators in their interactions with families. Here, the model given in Chapter 6 is used as a mechanism for analysing the way parents and educators reflect on the nature of the relationships. By examining the data, and seeking to find instances where the underpinning philosophy, core principles and key characteristics of FCP were present, the study was able to analyse the extent to which FCP was inherent in practice. Starting with the perspectives from the parents, the extent to which FCP was enacted in practice is presented, followed by the analysis of the way FCP can be found in the words of the educators.

### **8.3.2 The underlying philosophy of FCP as presented by the parents**

The underlying philosophy of FCP is that families are pivotal the lives of their children and that they should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children.

The parents' perceptions of themselves as shared decision makers has already been

discussed. This is certainly apparent in the way parents are recognised as pivotal in the lives of their children in each of the parent interviews. There are many offerings in which this is evident across all of the interviews, where the parents felt that the educators respected their role as parent and sought to share information about the happenings at the centre. There is also the sense that the parents felt valued in their role of sharing information about their children. Table 11 presents a snapshot of some of their responses.

**Table 11 Parents beliefs that they are respected in their pivotal role as parents**

Sarah	<p>[They tell me] what he has done, positive things which aid his development, things I can't see but want to know about.</p> <p>I know what he is interested in and I can carry this on at home and work on helping him to learn.</p> <p>They take the time to tell me what he has done [what he has] played with, who he has played with.</p> <p>I make my child ready for them, and they make my child ready for me.</p>
Vivienne	<p>You know, they taught me with my first one how to get a child into a routine, and the importance of having a child in a routine.</p> <p>They helped me toilet train my kids; they guided me through being a parent; they guided me through everything.</p> <p>I separated from my husband, and the day that I did that I walked in the door and the staff knew straight away something was wrong. And they guided [me] through that, they guided my kids through that. And the first thing that they did was went out and bought a couple of books on separated families, to be able to talk the kids through what that's all about.</p> <p>The interactions have varied. They've varied from being just carers for my kids, to being guides for me as a parent, to being a support system through good and bad times.</p> <p>Your feedback was always asked for. It always felt like it was welcomed. And that was great, because then you did feel like you were part of the centre.</p> <p>They not only supported my kids, but supported me as a parent, as a person, as a family.</p>
Theresa	<p>I think they had a good way of... expressing themselves to us as well, to... not scare us off, because [with] something like that, parents can get their back up and not worry about going somewhere to get it diagnosed.</p> <p>We do talk socially about things outside the centre, and what our family's doing and what they're doing and if they've been on a holiday.</p> <p>I like to feel comfortable when I'm entering a centre where my child's going to spend the whole day. I need to know the staff.</p> <p>I need to have that feeling that somebody is there acting as if it were me there.</p> <p>You really feel like you're safe. There's that feeling of feeling safe. I go to work and I don't... worry about anything.</p>

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Alison      I was going through a lot of problems. My mum passed away... they were very supporting.

They have lots of family dinners, and they've also had some parent forums that we've come along to, and I've seen the interactions with the staff and with the parents.

They always told you something special that [daughter] might have done that day, which I found nice, because you kind of don't know what's happening.

We got a lovely DVD when she was in the babies' room of her experiences there. It just went beyond.

So the displays they have up, I can see the types of things that she's doing, I think that's really important, so when I come in to pick her up I can see what things they've done.

I said, 'I'm mourning Mum', and they said 'We'll keep going here with it. You do what you need to do'.

I'm a single mum, so I think it's extremely important because I feel like they're helping me mould [daughter].

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That families should be empowered to engage in shared decision making for their children is not apparent in the interviews of the parents. While the parents perceived themselves as empowered decision makers, the extent to which they in fact actually engaged in share decision making is not apparent. Certainly, Theresa used words like 'feeling confident' that the educators were doing a good job, and in doing a handover every morning and evening with the educators working with her children suggests she was empowered to share information on her child's wellbeing and needs as a partner in her daily care. Even the way she felt that she did not need to take an active role in decision making for her second child was a form of being empowered. However, again, the interviews present a sense of ambiguity, in that the parents said that they felt empowered, such as the comment from Sarah: 'I feel empowered – they respect me and are respectful. They make me aware'. However, she later mentioned that she had 'not really (been) asked for [her] input'. Vivienne commented that she was 'empowered, because the staff talked to [her]' and told her what was going on with program. The reflection she presents regarding making the cake also indicates a sense of feeling



empowered to engage in decision making for her children, but the instance of sharing her child's interests in reading appears contrary to this.

### **8.3.3 The core principles underpinning FCP – the parents**

Core to FCP is an understanding that children exist in the context of their families, the wider community and society, and a recognition that what affects one family member impacts on all the others. As with the notion that families are pivotal in the lives of their children, the context of the family existing within a broader ecological is an important principle of FCP. This recognition was not a strong factor in the parent interviews. Vivienne did recognise that the educators were understanding of her child and her family within this context when she spoke of the time she separated from her husband:

I separated from my husband, and the day that I did that I walked in the door and the staff knew straight away something was wrong. And they guided through that, they guided my kids through that.

Alison, too, offered a view that the educators recognised that what affects one family member impacts on all the others when she spoke of the time her mother passed away:

I was going through a lot of problems, my mum passed away, so I was going through a lot of angst with that. At the same time she moved into a new setting, but they were terrific, they were very supporting.

Recognising that all parents have strengths is also a core principle that underpins FCP.

The extent to which the parent participants perceived themselves as having strengths was not always apparent across each of the interviews. Both Vivienne and Theresa viewed themselves as possessing many strengths in their role as a parents, and in the knowledge they possessed about their child. Vivienne highlighted this:

Nobody knows their child like a parent... to make their life easier, I think they need to understand my child as well as what I do.

She believed she could give them the tools to be able to handle her son. Theresa also presented as recognising the strengths she had a parent when she spoke of having to 'make sure each of the carers knew [her son's] routine', because she saw herself as an active contributor in planning out his individual program. Neither Sarah nor Alison spoke of themselves in this way; in fact, Alison even suggested that she didn't 'know much for the ages between zero and five'.

#### **8.3.4 The key characteristics of FCP as presented by the parents: culturally sensitivity, inclusive, individualised and reciprocal relationships and flexible and responsive services**

Several key characteristics have been described as central to FCP, such as being culturally sensitive, having inclusive and reciprocal relationships, and services and programs which are individualised, flexible and responsive to the needs of individual families. The extent to which these were evident in the way the parents discussed the interactions with the educators are examined in the following section, along with an examination of how they recognised and respected one another's expertise. The notions of parents having meaningful involvement and being empowered as key decision makers are explored later in the chapter.

Cultural sensitivity has been identified as one of the key characteristics that underpin FCP; however, this was not evidenced in the interviews by the parents in this study. While the educators did demonstrate an awareness of cultural sensitivities, Sarah was the one parent who expressed reflections of cultural sensitivity. She commented that she felt she was closer to the educators in the room who had the same culture as her, as she could have conversations in her home language and share her culture. The other

three parents did not discuss culture which could have been as they did not see themselves as having a diverse cultural identity. In contrast, there was a strong feeling that the parents viewed the relationships as being inclusive and reciprocal and this quality permeated all of the parent interviews. There are also several examples that demonstrate individualised, flexible and responsive services, such as when Sarah discussed the Turkish meals, and when Vivienne mentioned the cooking. Theresa also referred to individualised, flexible and responsive services when she said:

Everything had to be spoken about and worked out, and with each of the carers. We had to make sure each of the carers knew his routine.

Table 12 presents a range of examples that offer an insight into the reflections of the parents which support the interactions as being demonstrative of the characteristics inherent in FCP.

**Table 12 Parents interviews reflecting the key characteristics of FCP**

Sarah	<p>They usually say things like ‘How are you?’ or things concerning my son at home, or I ask them questions about my son.</p> <p>We have a common language and we talk about [son] and food.</p> <p>He is really shy and he doesn’t talk much. She got him talking and I was amazed and asked her how she did this. She said she got down to him and got him to answer her. I was shocked and pleased.</p> <p>I know what he is interested in and I can carry this on at home and work on helping him to learn.</p> <p>They take the time to tell me what he has done, [what he has] played with , who he has played with.</p> <p>They respect me and are respectful. They make me aware.</p> <p>The centre does try and do some Turkish meals.</p>
Vivienne	<p>The first thing that they did was went out and bought a couple of books on separated families, to be able to talk the kids through what that’s all about.</p> <p>They’ve varied from being just carers for my kids, to being guides for me as a parent, to being a support system through good and bad times.</p> <p>You see your kids relating to them, and you see your kids falling in love with them; you can’t help but fall in love with them.</p> <p>She [centre coordinator] was always there, always handy to get to. You could always talk to her, she was always listening to you, so you could always give your feedback. Never took offence at anything, she always listened.</p>

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She knew everybody's name as soon as they walked in the door, or you always at least got a 'Hi'... You always felt the warmth when you walked through the door. And that felt great to be able to turn around and know that my son loves cooking and they were open to maybe doing a cooking class for him.

I want to know my son on the same level that they know him, and I want them to know him on the same level that I do.

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Theresa They've very approachable. I think the staff, the management who were running the centre... were both very approachable, and I think they had a good way of... expressing themselves to us as well.

It's more of, you know, a connection with the staff in the room, and things are handled on a daily basis, or a weekly basis.

If anything comes up (which is not very often), we'll discuss it, and it's kind of worked out within a week or two.

Aside from the kids... we do talk socially about things outside the centre, and what our family's doing and what they're doing and if they've been on a holiday.

I need to feel that they are there for the right reasons, and you know that they're there to support the parents. They're there to communicate ideas, and... any concerns.

[It] is like dropping off your kids at a family.

We have a pretty open relationship and a comfortable one.

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Alison I think it's more the way they welcome you in the mornings.

I was going through a lot of problems... they were terrific, they were very supporting.

She's [the cook] very welcoming, always has a lovely word to say... even the other girls who aren't working with [her] now will still welcome her... They don't close the door, they're very welcoming, the whole centre's beautiful.

Just having that open relationship, so if there is a concern with (daughter) they can come and tell me and vice versa.

I'm a single mum, so I think it's extremely important because I feel like they're helping me mould [daughter].

I just think that if you work together... from their point of view, it makes their job easier too because they get to know the child, so they know what they need to do.

It's probably because they just know me too, my personality. We can have a laugh.

What I like is they don't treat me differently because I'm sure they all speak about their different dynamics.

I think we have similar beliefs.

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### **8.3.5 Key characteristics of meaningful parent involvement and a sharing of complete and unbiased information**

While there was a strong sense from the parents that the relationships they had with the educators were inclusive and reciprocal, and that they were recognised as being pivotal in the lives of their children, what was missing in these interviews was an apparent recognition that as parents, they had strengths and should have been key contributors in

the decision making for their children. When the interviews of the parents did relate to the notion that all families have strengths, this related more to the way the families viewed themselves, rather than how they felt they were viewed by the educators.

There was a level of ambiguity in the way the parents discussed themselves as having strengths. At times, the interviewees presented this view, while at other times the parents seemed to defer to what they perceived was the expertise of the educators to give them the help they were seeking. Sarah reflected on her own strengths in the way she spoke about knowing her son and being able to support his learning at home, but later, when asked if she felt that the caregivers could learn from her, she resounded that she had never thought of this. Theresa also reflected this thinking when she spoke about the handover at the beginning and end of the day with her second child, but felt she did not have the confidence when her son was diagnosed with additional learning needs, and appeared to rely on the expertise of the educators to guide her through the process:

It's the crèche who were the first to advise us, and had we not had that advice so early, I guess it could have taken us a lot longer to get in health [workers].

In contrast, Vivienne spoke of incidences when she shared her knowledge and understanding of her children with the educators to provide input into the program, but was in turn advised that her ideas were not necessarily in the best interests of her child's learning, and she was grateful for this advice. She also spoke of seeking advice from the educators in relation to parenting skills, again relying on the expertise of the educators to give her the advice she needed. Alison also noted that while she saw herself as a competent and knowledgeable primary school teacher, she remarked that in

parenting her own younger child she needed advice and parenting support from the educators, who she felt were more knowledgeable than her:

Well, you think you would know, but I don't know, that's the thing.

This despite that as a parent, she recognised that her daughter was not ready to be toilet trained, and she followed the guidance of the educators, who again, she seemed to position as more knowledgeable experts.

I thought I knew... I don't think she was quite ready, she had the signs, but she'd wet herself and then sit on the toilet, all sorts of things, so to me she wasn't making that connection.

This positioning of the educators as more knowledgeable experts negates the notion of recognising and respecting one another's expertise, and it could be argued that if parents are not recognised for their strengths, they are not recognised and respected for their expertise.

FCP positions parents as *key* decision makers in addressing their children's and family's needs, which is a characteristic that places this model within the broader framework of partnerships. There is little evidence, however, from the parent interviews that they were in fact sharing the decision making in meaningful ways.

While at times the parents gave a sense that they believed they were sharing the decision making, this was contrary to what was presented in the examples provided by the parents themselves. For example, in relation to her son, Theresa said that she felt she was sharing the decision making:

Everything had to be spoken about and worked out, and with each of the carers, we had to make sure each of the carers knew his routine.

However, it is not evident how much involvement she had in the decision making here. She also spoke of an instance where she was surprised that an additional health worker had been brought in to observe her son. Later reflected that if a decision regarding the overall centre program was made, she would 'have a chance to express yourself... so definitely get a heads up', but expressing yourself may not mean that you can influence the decisions that are being made.

The analysis of the interviews also reveals that the parents were not being provided with complete and unbiased information to enable them to make informed choices, yet this fundamental practice of making informed choices is a key characteristic of FCP. Regarding Vivienne's interview, it could be argued that the two examples of her making informed choices based on a sharing of complete and unbiased information were those regarding the cake cooking and her daughter learning to read. However, it could also be argued that she did not necessarily receive complete and unbiased information in relation to supporting her daughter to develop her literacy skills, because she was not then supported to understand how she could build her daughter's literacy development in practical ways. She spoke later about toilet training, and while she credited the educators with helping her toilet train her children, there was no indication here as to whether the toilet training was driven by her choices or the centre's decision that this needed to occur.

Theresa presented differently in regards to the characteristic of informed family choice. The educators and the centre leadership team identified her son as having additional learning needs and then worked with Theresa throughout the process of the diagnosis and accessing of additional support services. While it could be argued that this involved

making informed choices, the relationship seems to be driven in this instance by the educators, and it is unclear whether the educators were providing unbiased or complete information. It may have been only the information the educators felt was necessary for the parent to hear in order to acknowledge her son's needs and to seek the assistance they felt necessary. Theresa stated that, 'I guess, without a diagnosis, it was very hard for them to then continue their work with him'. Interestingly, she also spoke about not necessarily agreeing with the educators' decision to toilet train her child, but went along with the decisions of the educator, rather than making an informed choice in this. She commented that:

Toilet training, that's something they put on us to, you know, to have to do, and sometimes you might not feel that your child's ready because children take that at different, you know, sort of times, not everyone can just get toilet training as soon as they turn three or whatever it is.

This sentiment was similarly presented by Alison.

### **8.3.6 Relational and participatory behaviours as enacted by parents**

Central to FCP is the distinction between the relational and participatory behaviours (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst et al., 2007; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). For FCP to be effectively enacted, both participatory as well as relational behaviours need to occur. There was a pervading sense throughout the interviews of all four parent participants that relational behaviours were present. In Sarah's interview there was a strong indication that in her mind, the educators were engaging in positive relational behaviours. With Vivienne, the interpersonal behaviour was very evident, and could be described as relational, because she had obviously formed a strong bond and emotional attachment with the educators at the centre, particularly prior to the centre leaders



leaving. There are also many examples in Theresa’s interview of relational behaviours guiding her reflections on the interactions she had with the educators. As with the other parents, Alison’s interview demonstrates strong relational behaviours, where she felt she had a strong connection with the educators, who made her and other families feel special. Table 13 provides examples of the ways relational behaviours are evident.

**Table 13 Examples of relational behaviours as expressed by the parents**

Sarah	They notice me and say hi, they ask [son] how he is and talk about his day. I [feel] closer to the qualified, and the carer in the room is of the same culture as me, and we have a common language and we talk about Eid and food.
Vivienne	The interactions have varied. They’ve varied from being just carers for my kids, to being guides for me as a parent, to being a support system through good and bad times. The individuals themselves have been very personable. They’ve been just the right people for the jobs. They have the right personality. They’ve been welcoming – great with kids, great with people full stop. You see your kids relating to them, and you see your kids falling in love with them; you can’t help but fall in love with them.
Theresa	The bond between ourselves and the staff here is quite close. They’re very helpful. They’re very approachable, I think the staff, the management who were running the centre... I think they had a good way of... expressing themselves. I adore them just as much as I did when [son] just started here.
Alison	I think it’s more the way they welcome you in the mornings... there were lots of hugs and hello and welcoming by name. We think we’re special when we come in, but there’s someone behind who gets the same welcome. So it’s not just our welcome, it’s everybody’s welcome. They’re very welcoming. The whole centre’s beautiful. They always told you something special that [daughter] might have done that day, which I found nice.

What is not as clearly evident from the parent interviews, however, are the participatory behaviours practised by the educators that support the parents in their being active participants in the decision making. Sarah gave some examples of participatory decision making:

I told his caregiver once that he was interested in using the scissors and she started using the scissors with him at the centre.

However, she also gave examples that contradicted herself:

I didn't really think that I had a role of providing and adding input onto the program for my son.

Reference by Vivienne to the way the educators responded to her suggesting providing a cooking experience, as well as Alison in relation to the relinquishing of the pacifier, are also being examples of participatory practice. There are, however, examples of instances when participatory behaviours were *not* evident, such as when Sarah stated

I have given them some recipes, but when I ask if they have used them they say they will get around to it.

The examples of toilet training given by both Theresa and Alison could also be seen as occasions when the parents were not actively participating in the decision making, because both of these parents appeared to have hesitations regarding the appropriateness of these decisions.

## **8.4 Family-centred practice as enacted by educators**

### **8.4.1 Families are pivotal in the lives of their children and should be empowered to engage in shared decision making**

An analysis of the interviews of the educators produces a view of the interactions as sitting within a model of FCP very different from those of the parents. The educators offered a very clear recognition that families were pivotal in the lives of their children, and that children existed within the context of their families and broader communities (Table 10). Kylie explicitly stated that the philosophy of the centre had 'always recognised parents as the first educators in their children's lives', but there was less recognition of parents as sharing in the decision making and of the educators

empowering parents to be active participants in this decision making process. Kylie identified that for her, FCP involved recognising ‘what the family want and what they require from us, and being able to work around that, or with them, to accomplish the same goals’, but she did not give any examples that show how she had engaged parents in the decision making around the setting of goals or influencing the program.

Vignette 8 – Rosa (an educator)

Rosa was an educator and she came to mind as someone who was vibrant and engaging. She actually told me she was 47 and we had that sort of a relationship from the outset. I knew that when she was 16 she was married, but it wasn’t an arranged marriage. This level of trust characterised our time together. I had a bouncing feeling, effusiveness and strong quality of connectedness with her. It was not a surprise that she told me that she and I having not met before had an instant quality of connection. She went on to discuss how she married this boy but they were not really ‘allowed to get married’ and that she migrated to Australia and he was concerned she would forget about him. So they got married illegally. They were teenagers. Our conversation moved on to her discussion around her two children and her history of working in the factories and the sorts of things in her life that led to learning and her own development. It was really clear to me that her own life-world had been enriched because of her life of experiences. I was struck by her genuine affection and love for the people that she worked with. This quality of affection was spread across the children, families and her fellow colleagues. She was an educator that every parent would love to have looking after their children. I know I would! I recollected how Rosa was not unlike a similar woman, Ana, from Chile, who had looked after my own children. Ana and Rosa both are identifiable as being caring and nurturing and indeed ‘adore the children they work with’. As a parent, having someone adore my children is very important.

Rosa was devoted to the quality of her work. She was caring, compassionate and loving. She had this quality of exuberance and love for everything she did in her work life. The quality of her motivation was interesting – intrinsically, she was very present and mindful.

Being there was at the centre of her work. She did seem to be very present while she was working. She didn't talk about her work from the context of a theoretical framework, and it felt like the work was more important than the theory to support it.

As the researcher, I felt that she was one of the most beautiful people you would want to know – or meet in your life. Her work in the child care setting was characterised by these qualities of deep caring. Her partnership interactions were encapsulated by her assertion 'we are family'.

This illustrates the intuitive nature of her work. She engaged this way in the centre because this was her way of being and knowing.

'I am family, I am a parent, I am a mother, so when I think about it I want them to talk to me... I put myself into their shoes first. Most of the parents are happy that I am a mum.'

The other educators did not offer any discussion that would suggest a recognition that the educators viewed the families as key decision makers in addressing their children's and family's needs. Actually, there were some contradictory indications that the educators were the goal setters and decision makers informing parents, rather than seeking their contribution. This was evident when Alina spoke of parents coming 'to any meetings that we've set up for them, and they feel they have to because we've brought a meeting' or of parents needing to accept that 'for him to grow, he's got to learn this way'. Table 14 presents examples of the educators sharing decision making with families

**Table 14 Educators sharing decision making with families**

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Kylie	I've had a lot of time to get to know the families... I do have good relationships with [them] and they've gotten to know me. It's much easier on the family and on me, and on the child, in terms of if something happens, or I need to speak to them about something, or I have concerns, it's much easier for me in terms of my confidence and the way I approach it, to go up to a parent of a child that I've had for many years and have a good relationship.
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	You get to know a family, know why a child is upset, because you know they've had a late night at home.
Susie	<p>You can learn more about the child and their background, because it's easier to plan and stuff because you know.</p> <p>You find out things by talking to them.</p> <p>They stay around and you get to know them... you talk about your home life together, and that kind of thing, and you sort of know how their family works.</p>
Maria	<p>I greet them, I make the eye contact with the families, make sure I'm listening. I'm here for them and for their child.</p> <p>If you make parents, families, comfortable, because they're sending children to strangers, if they feel comfortable, if they trust me, it's better for their lives and the child's lives too.</p> <p>The child is of course the family's first priority.</p> <p>It's a part of my role. I am working as a child care worker and educator. This is part of my role to develop good relationships with families.</p>
Rosa	<p>When they receive a call from here, even if it's a little thing... I can feel that pain when we rang telling them. And that's important that you feel the same as a mum.</p> <p>We are a partnership with their families, especially with mum. Everyone is just a whole big family. Like grandma, grandfather.</p> <p>I write Turkish and [on] the side it's English [about] what's she's doing in Turkish and explain, and I write in English too. Because some older parents, grandfathers, grandmothers, don't understand English.</p>
Alina	<p>Usually the special needs [parents of children with additional needs] want me to talk about their child because I'm working with them one on one.</p> <p>So how important is it to you that you have a real relationship with the families, and why do you think it's important? So I know how to take care of their children in a way I'd want if I was their... mother.</p> <p>I put myself in their situation, as a mother, and how I'd want my children to feel if they were coming to a place like this and having strangers look after them.</p> <p>We're both looking out for what's good for... the parents' child.</p>
Connie	<p>We try and feel and like we reach out to those families and show them that there's more to us than just minding children. We're here to help the whole family and include them.</p> <p>We actually do learning stories in the family's language if we can.</p> <p>We always say the family is very, very important for that child to have an identity of where they come from.</p>

#### 8.4.1 Educators recognising that all families have strengths

None of the examples above, however, recognise that all families have strengths. In contrast, these examples position the educators as being the more knowledgeable experts, a theme that recurs throughout the interviews of the educators and fits with the role of 'help giver' as identified by Dunst (2010). Along with the examples listed below, in Table 15, Alina also stated that she believed that at times parents did not have

the best interests of their child as core, making statements such as ‘Don’t work so much! Spend some time with your children, because some are here 24/7’. Only Rosa did not position herself in the role of the more knowledgeable ‘other’ or as a help giver, and her interviews reveal a strong sense of inclusive and reciprocal relationships. She stated:

We have them five days a week, and they become like your own, and their family is your family, you’re living in a big family.

**Table 15 Educators as more knowledgeable experts**

Kylie	There’s parents that I do have very close relationships with. [They] will come to me for advice and to chat and to get my opinion, knowing that I have an education in early years.
Susie	We explain to them, we’re a play-based program and stuff like that. But I think a lot of parents think that learning to write and... the important things, and I don’t think they realise the benefits of play.
Maria	Sometimes [to] some families, you need to give more feedback about the child, how is the child. Some families ask more questions. Of course they’re all the same. If they ask me more, I’ll help them more, of course.
Alina	I try to be sensitive to that, to be helpful to them, so they can help their child grow.
Connie	We always say to them, the whole thing with this new curriculum is play based... we realise that kids learn so much in play, and how important.

### 8.4.3 The key characteristics of FCP as present in the educator interviews

While they all discussed the importance of sharing information, this sharing of information appeared to be on the terms of the educators. Connie seemed not be listening to what information the parents were actually seeking:

With this new curriculum, in one way we’re talking more, you know, about the new curriculum, but some families just want to know if their children have had a good day.

This information sharing did not appear then to translate into active participation by parents in the decision making.

#### Vignette 9 – Maria (an educator)

Maria was another educator who was born in Turkey and immigrated to Australia, and like with Alina, I did not really feel that I got to know her during our time together. I did know she had grown-up children, had worked in early childhood for five years all at this same centre, going into study when her children had grown up. She had been an accountant in her home country, but she loved children, so this was the area she wanted to work in now. What I also knew about Maria is that she had a diploma-level qualification, but she told me that she only worked as a diploma qualified two days a week, and the other three she was employed as a certificate-level assistant, which to me says a lot about how she saw herself – not seeking a position that enabled her to work full time in a role commensurate with her qualification.

While Maria at first appeared quite confident in speaking with me, it was the way she presented her responses that stuck with me. She seemed to be saying all the things that would have been expected of her – almost like being in a job interview, reciting the views that would be expected of a qualified early childhood educator. But I didn't really get the sense that these responses came from the heart. 'I greet them, I make the eye contact with the families, make sure I'm listening, I'm here for them and for their child.' She also spoke of the centre practice as following accreditation: 'Our centre policy is to develop a good relationship with families.'

When she spoke of her interactions with the families what jumped out for me was the one-sided nature of the interactions – it seemed to be about that if she could connect with the parents, they could give her information about their child to then help her to prepare for their child in the centre. There did not seem to be any thinking about what she could do for them.

She had an interesting response when I asked her if she had a partnership or a relationship with the families. She clearly said it was a relationship, because it was close, relating this particularly to the families from her own Turkish background, as she was able to give them information relating to children and services, 'because if the family doesn't know where to go, we always help them, so a relationship is makes it closer between the child, centre and families'.

However, I was also struck by her sense of defensiveness – almost a feeling of diminution when recalling parents with whom she felt undervalued, who she felt treated her as a babysitter, or who got angry if she did not do what they asked, and she would avoid parents who she could not connect with and communicate with. She made an interesting comment: ‘Everyone needs to be nice – or should try to be’ when speaking about how she treats families.

Sharing unbiased and complete information to support families to make informed choices is a key characteristic underpinning FCP, but the sharing of information that is engaged with by the educators appeared to be solely for informing the design of the program, rather than for giving families information to make informed choices. Sarah spoke of sharing information because:

you can learn more about the child and their background, because it’s easier to plan and stuff... through what parents have told me I’ve been able to plan through that.

Maria said:

I introduce myself, and talk about my role, and then if they need anything any time, they can ask or they can share their child’s life, like their routines and their children’s needs and interests with me.

While cultural sensitivity appears to be a strong characteristic presented by the educators, the other characteristics that identify FCP, such as inclusive and reciprocal relationships, individualised flexible coordinated and responsive services and informed family choice, were not as apparent. Connie and Rosa seemed particularly strongly culturally sensitive in their discussions on the way they created learning stories in the families’ home languages. They noted how they tried to speak with families using one or two words in their home language and positively supported parents in maintaining



their cultural identity at home. Connie and Rosa both endeavoured to bring the cultural backgrounds of the families into the program.

Vignette 10 – Connie (an educator)

Connie had an air of authority and a presence – which came about from longevity and experience – but not of arrogance. She described herself to me as ‘a parent, grandparent and a member of the community’. She told me that she was 60 years old. But to look at her and to listen to her you would have felt that she was in her late 40s. ‘Working with children keeps you young,’ she told me. She came from an Italian background. One of her most accomplished achievements was her little granddaughter. It was funny, because when the other educators found out that I was interviewing Connie for this study, they laughingly said, ‘Make sure she doesn’t get started on her granddaughter or you will never get out of there!’ I found that I really got to know Connie in this interview. Not surprisingly, there was much discussion in the interview about her granddaughter and how she kept her home from child care when they were together so they could share the day – even enrolling her granddaughter in the centre so she could attend child care with her. She was proud of the centre, and proud that families came to the centre on recommendation from others in the community.

Her sense of authority was quite interesting, because she did not have any formal qualifications in early childhood, but did have over 20 years’ experience – working as a cook, and integration aide, an assistant and with every age group of children across the centre – and she spoke of this proudly. She respected parents and their role, and they respected her longevity, creating that sense of having knowledge based on years of experience and that parents would welcome this. She was warm and engaging and I got the impression that she would see the families in the same context that she might see her own daughter or daughter-in-law seeking advice from her about their children. She spoke very much about the centre and the families and staff as being a family, and I really got a sense of how this would be. Her conversation showed a sense of empathy towards families, which guided how she viewed the parents, and made statements such as, ‘I can imagine going to another country and not knowing how to speak their language’.

While some of the other educators spoke of families as being difficult, scary or intimidating, Connie turned this right around. She described these families as just needing time to develop trust and create a connection. Interestingly, she did describe her role as that of teaching parents – telling them about the frameworks – and about why it was important for the parents to maintain the child’s first language.

Rosa also spoke of sharing her own cultural identity with families, particularly as it related to religious celebrations:

There’s one Lebanese lady, she covers herself. I’ve got a good relationship with the husband. Every time he comes in he’ll talk about religion, because we celebrate the same celebrations, and then we talk about fasting.

Connie said that:

They see a lot of the staff: there’s Muslim, you know there’s a mixed religion here. So they don’t feel like they’re somehow being isolated because they’re (here).

She also said that they respected cultural customs:

If we’ve had a male child care worker, and they didn’t like the male changing the nappies, we’ve just had to reassure them that the women [did it]. We just had to respect that. And it’s just part of their culture.

#### **8.4.4 Relational and participatory behaviours as enacted by educators**

As with the findings from the parent interviews, there was strong evidence of the relational behaviours shown by all the educators as engaging in relationships that mirror FCP. Table 16 below provides an insight into ways this occurred.

**Table 16 Educators reflecting relational behaviours in their practice**

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Kylie	A lot of the kids I have this year I’ve known since they were two. So I’ve been able to form really good relationships with their parents.
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	<p>There are a few families that I have a friendship with, those parents whose children I've cared for for a very long time, I have a friendship with. There are families [with whom] I have got a professional relationship that's still trusting and respectful. Things like family dinners and stuff – we've been able to sit down and chat.</p>
Susie	<p>I would consider them [to be] the ones where they stay around and you get to know them... you talk about your home life together.</p> <p>We've got other families where you're friendly with the parents, and you're fine to talk to them, but there's still that sort of barrier.</p>
Maria	<p>I have to make eye contact, listen very carefully, make sure that she or he understands I am listening, you know, about the child or sometimes their own problem.</p> <p>I ask always when I greet them, 'How was last night, how was the child?'</p> <p>If they bring children happily here, I believe they think they are a partner with us, they continue to bring their children. Eighty per cent of children come from the babies' room and then go to school.</p>
Rosa	<p>'Oh, you're in the toddlers' room, that's good,' they said, 'My daughter is starting the toddlers' room'. That was last year, so they were happy to see me there, because they know me for the three or four years.</p> <p>Even talking about their day when they come and pick them up: 'Oh how was your day?' And they love talking in the afternoon because they don't have time in the morning.</p>
Alina	<p>If we talk with them on the same level, you know, don't talk down to them, and use all these flash words that... first parents haven't heard before, and kind of be their friend about it.</p> <p>When I see them I'll stop and [say] hello, and try and get [an] interview happening.</p>
Connie	<p>People will say, 'You've been recommended here' at [suburb], because you guys respect customs, and language, and special needs, so we're actually recommended. Straight away I try and make them feel comfortable and say, 'I know a few words in Turkish, today's menu's a Turkish dish'.</p> <p>We try and feel and like we reach out to those families and show them that there's more to us than just minding children. We're here to help the whole family and include them.</p>

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The evidence of the participatory behaviours in their practice, however, were not as evident. There are few examples of instances that support the notion of the educators engaging parents to actively and meaningfully participate in decision making practices.

Maria said:

[In my] experience they want us to listen carefully... and follow up the child's routine, whatever the child's needs and interests, they want us to follow. So when we make the routines we always ask the parents how they want it, what's the child doing at home.

Susie identified that ‘they put out a letter with the newsletter saying we need ideas for our room or if you want to help’, which was the closest her interviews came to reflect participatory behaviour; however, these were the only two occasions that it was evident.

## **8.5 What the documents and artefacts show about partnership and family-centred practice**

The centre provides a vast array of both visual displays and paper-based documentation with the aim of engaging families in the service. These artefacts include:

- visual displays that outline the centre philosophy
- the program as it relates to each of the children’s rooms and children’s participation in learning and other aspects of the centre day
- assessments of children’s learning in the form of learning stories
- information of the curriculum and the learning framework that guides the practice of the educators
- information on child health and care issues such as anaphylaxis
- a parent notice board.

On the day the researcher visited the service to collect documentation there was also a display celebrating a recent family dinner.

Photographs of these visual displays were taken to enable this documentation to be included in the study. A feedback box was also left in the foyer, but at the time of the data collection was devoid of any entries. Further paper-based documentation was also collected as it related to engagement with parents. This included a copy of the centre parent handbook (called a procedural manual), a centre- and a room-specific newsletter

and a copy of a child's learning journal, which a parent who was an educator working at the centre granted permission to include in the study.

Because these displays and documents were used as a means of engaging with families and supporting the relationships between the educators and the families, the documentation, displays and artefacts were examined to explore the extent to which they reflected the partnership framework used as the basis when analysing the interviews. They were also used to gauge the extent to which they were in keeping with the principles and characteristics of family-centred practice.

### **8.5.1 Procedural manual**

As discussed previously, the centre in this study was auspiced and managed by the municipal council for the local government area where the service was located. As well as managing this service, the council authority was also responsible for the management of another four long day care centres and twenty-four preschool centres. The management structure and the positioning of the centre within the broader organisational context influenced the documentation provided by the centre to families.

When families first commence at the centre they are provided with a copy of the centre policies. On examination of this document there appears to be little evidence of any sense of their being a partnership between the families and the service that is based on mutuality, trust reciprocity, or that families are acknowledged as sharing in the decision making. When first viewing this policy document the reader is drawn to the title page in which the document is referred to as the *2011 Procedural Manual*. On opening the front cover, there is no letter of welcome, no introduction to the centre, but rather an index page with 54 entries. The following page contains contact details, with the

provider number, and finally at the bottom of the page is the centre philosophy, presented in bullet point form under four subheadings: customer focus, respect, collaboration and innovation. When outlining the centre commitment to customer focus, relationships with families are highlighted using bullet points, which include:

Recognising that families are the first educators in their children's lives

Providing a centre which is happy, warm friendly, engaging and open

Building trusting relationships with all children, families and the community

Educators collaborating with families and children in developing an inclusive program

Engaging in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children's lives (*2011 Procedural Manual*, p. 2).

In the section relating to the centre philosophy is the subheading 'collaboration', where a strong commitment to collaborating with families is highlighted by encouraging them to be involved in the program and collaborating ideas, as well as seeking feedback and input into policies and procedures. This subsection also includes 'using families' understandings of their children to support shared decision making about each child's learning and development'.

The centre philosophy, as presented to families, had strong synergies with the characteristics of a partnership framework. There was a commitment to building trust and mutuality, in that educators collaborated with families as the first educators of their children, and the philosophy includes an explicit statement about shared decision making between educators and families. Interestingly, the manual also explicitly presents the centre philosophy as engaging in FCP 'by respecting the pivotal role of

families in children's lives', which is a core principle of the FCP model. Terms such as 'inclusive program', 'individuality of each and every child in our care', 'the importance of different cultures' and 'work collaboratively to share information' do reflect the key characteristics found in the FCP model of partnership. This centre philosophy statement presents a notion of interactions between parents and educators that are based on a partnership framework which is reflective of FCP.

However, within the body of the centre's procedural manual, notions of partnership and FCP disappear. Much of the remainder of the manual focuses on policies to which families need to be advised of and to which they need to adhere, using language that reads as largely procedural, such as that children will progress to the next room when developmentally appropriate (p. 3); 'we request that you collect your child/ren 10 minutes prior to closing time' (p. 5) and 'parents are required to inform educators of the child's diagnosed asthmatic condition' (p. 15). However, language can also be found throughout the manual that is more relational, such as 'the centre encourages orientation process, and will plan this with the family to meet individual needs' (p. 2). In the section that relates to family involvement the manual states that they (the centre) 'actively encourage[s] the involvement of parents in the operation of the centre' (p. 27), and then goes on to outline ways that the council services encourage this through fundraising, joining a parent advisory group, attending rostered duty session, family social events and sharing skills in the program such as singing (pp. 27–28). Interestingly, there is also a section on the procedure for toileting, where it states that educators will consult with parents to determine the child's individual needs for toilet training and in implementing strategies so home and child care are working towards the

same goal. 'Educators are to follow the child and parent's lead regarding toilet education for their children' (p. 30).

The *Procedural Manual* also includes a section that outlines a code of conduct that includes educators' conduct with families. Listed here are several points that reflect a sense of collaboration, where it discusses relationships that are based on mutual trust and open communication, mutual sharing of information and shared decision making, acknowledging the uniqueness of each family (p. 34).

### **8.5.2 Newsletters**

The centre also used regular newsletters as a means of engaging with families. A centre-wide newsletter, along with a newsletter produced by the educators for families of children in each room, is distributed to families monthly. On examining the centre-wide newsletter, it is evident that while it is a welcome to the new academic year, the purpose is largely information dissemination. Staffing across each of the rooms is listed, along with an update on the centre management positions. The newsletter then goes on to focus on procedural reminders such as late fees, absence closure dates, sun smart procedures and a reminder to ensure that parents do not allow strangers through the front door. The room newsletter is also a means largely for information provision. While welcoming new and returning families and introducing the educators, it also asks parents to bring in a family photo, dress their children in red to celebrate Chinese New Year and to remember to bring a hat and insect repellent. The tone and content of both these newsletters appear to be out of keeping with the core characteristics of partnership, which are based on mutuality, trust reciprocity and shared decision making. They also do not appear to reflect the philosophy of FCP, in that in the



newsletters there is not the sense that families are pivotal in the lives of children and should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children. While using engaging and responsive language such as ‘welcome to all our new families’ and ‘we hope everyone had a relaxing, enjoyable and safe holiday period’, the newsletters do not seek any input for families, or a sharing of information. Decisions about closing the centre for a professional development day have already been determined and families are merely being advised, and decisions about the program have also been made by the educators and again, parents are just simply being informed.

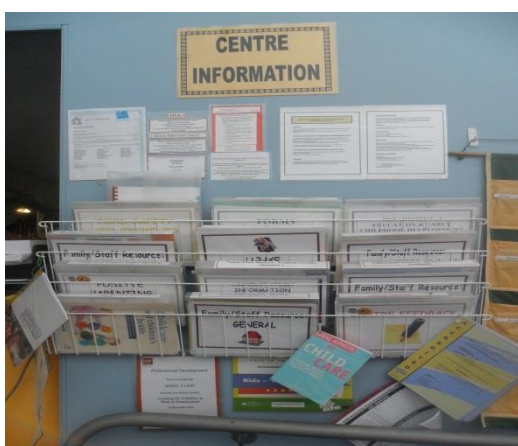
### **8.5.3 Wall displays and notice boards**

Throughout the centre, information was made available to parents by presenting it visually as wall displays. These displays were created to provide families with opportunities to keep informed and build their skills by focusing on the program for the children, parenting information and advice, the early years framework, child development and learning, policies and centre happenings. Visual displays such as these are an approach used to engage families in the centre, and were a key aspect to include when examining the nature of the interactions between educators and families. The information presented in the visual displays was analysed because it supported the engagement of parents in partnerships based on mutuality, trust and reciprocity and created opportunities for shared decision making and mutual goal setting. The extent to which the displays reflected the philosophy and characteristics that underpin FCP was also examined in the analysis.



**Figure 4 Our centre philosophy**

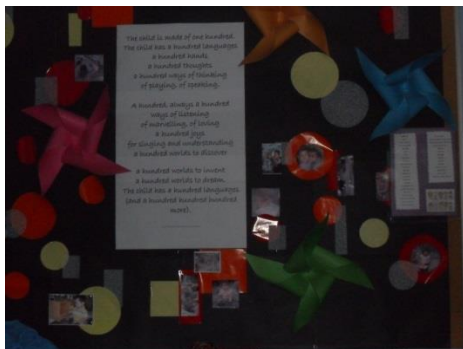
Similar to the newsletters, the content of these displays tend to focus on information provision. Several of the displays centre on information that was pertinent to attending the centre, such as photographs of the educators, the centre philosophy (which was invitingly displayed – see Figure 4) and centre information such as policies, forms and parenting resources (Figure 5).



**Figure 5 Centre information and forms**

There were also several displays that focused on children’s health and safety, including information on childhood immunisations, infectious diseases and safety with children.

Information that could be classified as parent education was also displayed, including a visual presentation of the poem ‘100 Languages of Children’ (Malaguzzi, as cited in Edwards et al., 2011, p. 3) (Figure 6) and a further poster titled *75 ways to encourage children* and another poster on positive parenting tips.



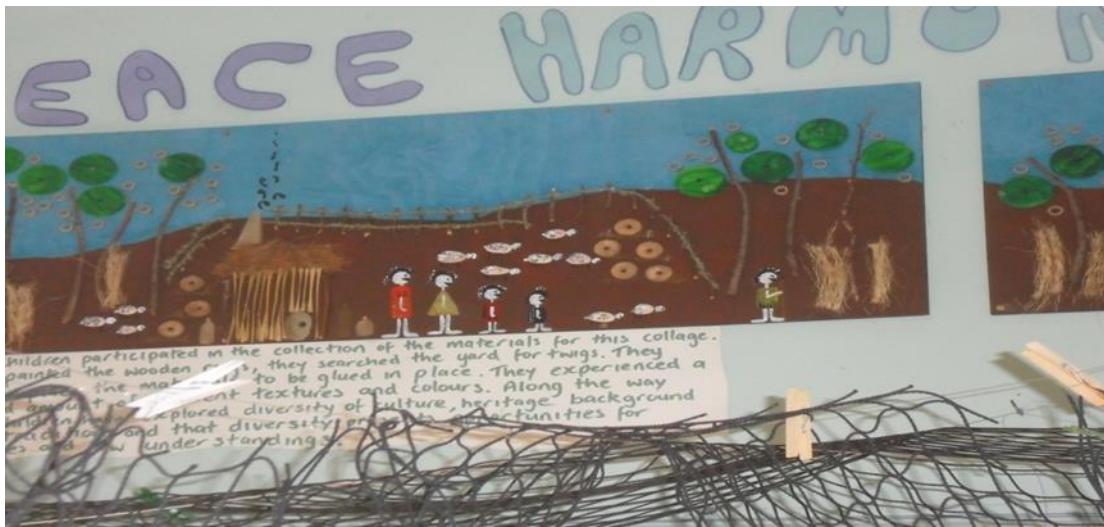
**Figure 6 Poem ‘100 languages’ (Mallaguzzi)**



**Figure 7 Babies room program**

Significant attention was placed on giving families information about the program, both in terms of providing broad information on how the EYLF and VEYLDF were implemented across the centre and also how it was implemented in the programming of each of the children’s rooms (Figure 7). Situated in the entrance foyer was a display outlining the learning outcomes identified in both learning frameworks, along with several individual learning stories used to demonstrate the learning that is occurring in the program. Outside each of the children’s rooms were displays that outlined the planning and program currently being enacted and also information highlighting experiences and activities the children had been engaged in (Figure 12). Other displays in the babies’ room included a toileting chart listing individual children’s toileting

patterns, as well as information aimed at parents on topics such as eating and feeding. A large mural created by the children was also displayed as a feature for parents outlining the children's involvement and the learning that occurred during the process (Figure 8).



**Figure 8 Children's mural**



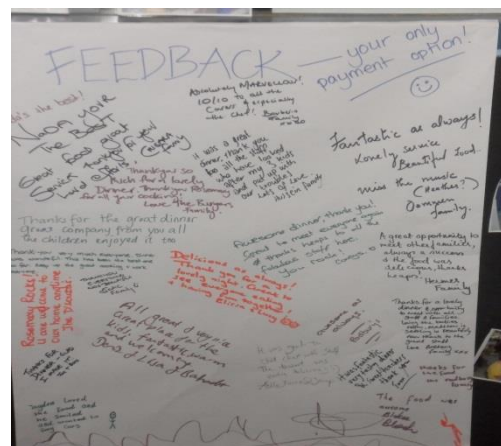
**Figure 9 Parent notice board**

A large display had been created that purposefully targeted parents (Figure 10). This display included information such as the fee structure, a Wikipedia reference to outdoor

play not causing illness, an invitation to ask the educators about their child’s learning or to share skills in the program. Interestingly, this display did not invite parents to contribute to any decision making regarding their child or the program, or indeed the centre overall. There was one display positioned outside the manager’s office in the entrance foyer that celebrated a recent family dinner event that included photographs of the event and a page for families to include feedback and comments. This was the only instance where the displays included the ‘voices’ of parents and families (Figures 10 & 11), and there were many contributions suggesting families had responded positively to the event.



**Figure 10 Photographs of families and educators from the family dinner**



**Figure 11 Parent feedback comments from family dinner**

In analysing these displays as they reflect either a partnership framework, or a model of FCP, there is little evidence of the underpinning characteristics that should be apparent. Given the amount and breadth of information that was presented for families, it is clear that the centre recognised the pivotal role of families in the lives of their children. The

centre displays were designed to assist parents to gain access to relevant information to support them in meeting their child's needs, both as a participant in the centre as well as more broadly in their learning and development needs. However, what is missing from these displays was any essence of mutuality, reciprocity or shared decision making found in the partnership framework. There was an absence of any of the key characteristics found in FCP, in that while information was provided, there was no avenue to share information collaboratively or evidence of meaningful decision making. There was also a lack of recognition of the expertise of the parent, except in relation to being invited to share a special skill or bring in something to the program from the parent's culture. While the underlying philosophy of FCP is that families are pivotal in the lives of their children, it is also about families being empowered as decision makers. This latter component was missing in the displays as presented.

#### **8.4.4 The children's learning portfolios**

Each child who attended the program had a personal portfolio that provided families a further opportunity to be 'part of [their] child's experiences whilst at [the] centre'.<sup>14</sup> This portfolio, titled *My Learning Journey* is located in the child's room close to the sign-in book, accessible to families. It is in the form of a bound scrapbook-style document. In the introductory page families are encouraged to 'become involved in this journey by contributing to your child's learning journey whilst at home'.

Acknowledging that the sample learning portfolio, which was collected from the centre, was done so early in the academic year (March 2011), the contributions to that time included several photographs of the child, some of which were annotated, along

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<sup>14</sup> This statement is taken from the introduction to the 'My Learning Journey'.

with samples of artwork. The sample also included one documented evaluation of learning that was linked to identified learning outcomes. While the introduction did encourage families to contribute, there was no evidence of parent input.

In analysing the learning portfolio as it contributes to creating interactions between parents and educators which could be described as a partnership, the sample provided in the study fell short. Nolan & Reynolds (2008) identify that ‘portfolios can offer the chance to become part of a collaborative process where all contributions are welcomed’ (p. 1). However, while the educators ‘welcome’ the families contributing to the portfolio at home, this had not occurred. This study frames partnerships as having four underpinning characteristics: mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making around mutually agreed goals, and these are important to remember when thinking about the practice of the educators in the way parents are engaged in the partnership. While the sample reflects mutuality, in that it encourages shared contributions, other characteristics were not present, because there was no shared decision making, reciprocity or mutual goals reflected in the portfolio. In considering the children’s learning portfolio from the viewpoint of FCP, there was little to indicate that any of the characteristics were present. Inviting parents to contribute at home recognises that children exist within the context of their families, wider community and society; however, this does not equate with participatory practice in decision making. There was no indication of how this information will be used in any shared decision-making capacity in the centre. When seeking to identify the characteristics central to the model of FCP as they were present in the portfolio, these were also not evident in the sample. The sample appeared to be merely a collection of work, rather than a learning journey,

and a sense of inclusion, reciprocal relationships, a recognition of one another's expertise, or meaningful parent involvement, were absent. This may have been a result of the time of the year the portfolio was accessed, or it may have been a demonstration in the gap in understanding by the educators of FCP as a model.

This chapter allows us to hear the voices of the participants as they discussed the nature of the interactions that occurred, and show how their understanding was enacted through the use of the documentation across the service. The following chapter outlines socio-cultural theory, describing its origins and applications in education and wider studies of families and relationships, and examines the relationship between this theory and an understanding of human behaviour. Using this theoretical lens, the chapter presents the analysis of the data using Rogoff's planes of analysis or 'lenses' through which human learning can be discussed to provide an insight into the influences shaping the nature of the interactions from the participants' individual perspectives, and the experiences, beliefs and understanding that have shaped these perspectives.



## Chapter 9 Viewing the data through Rogoff's lenses

Symbolic interactionism has as its premise that people's actions result from their interpretations of, and the meaning they attach to, the situations that confront them in their everyday lives. These meanings are socially constructed through engagement in social interactions and social groupings that impact on and respond to the activities of members in the group. Members of the group create shared meanings from their interactions with one another, and these shared meanings become their constructed reality. This perspective on how individuals locate meaning and construct reality shares similar traits with that of socio-cultural theories of learning.

Socio-cultural theory also presents a framework for viewing learning and behaviour as being shaped by our interactions, experiences and understandings derived from participating in a broad social and cultural context. Central to this theory is the premise that

[the] individual cannot be studied in isolation from the social, and that the individual, interpersonal and cultural process are not independent entities (Rogoff, 1998, p. 687).

With this understanding, this study has sought to explore the question of the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators is influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants.

Within a constructivist paradigm it is understood that learning and development are constructed within the context of social interactions. Socio-cultural theory builds on

this paradigmatic stance to consider the individual in terms of the social and cultural situation in which they operate. Viewing learning and development from a socio-cultural standpoint, the emphasis is on the characteristics of social participation and relationships, the setting activity and historical change as influencing and guiding learning (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000).

Socio-cultural learning theories are concerned with the social nature of learning and development, and in this study it is of particular interest to the researcher to discover the extent to which individual practice has been shaped by the experiences gained through cultural and historical contexts of the social world. The focus of study presupposes that the practice of engaging in the partnership with families has been shaped by knowledge which is inextricably a product of the activity and situations in which it is produced (Brown et al., 1989), namely, the cultural and social context of the educators, and it is 'essential to view the cognitive activities of individuals with this social context in which their thinking is embedded' (Rogoff, 1995, p. 42). This study also examines the extent to which the families' own experiences shaped their understanding and influenced the nature of the relationship they developed with the educators. Using socio-cultural theory as a perspective to guide the analysis provides an insight into the cultural models that shape families' understandings and how these are 'reconstituted over time in light of new information and experiential knowledge' (Skinner & Weisner, 2007, p. 304).

Barbara Rogoff (Rogoff, 1984; 1994; 1995; 1998; 2003; 2008; Rogoff et al., 1995) analyses learning and development as occurring across three 'planes', each one intertwined and interdependent on the other. Rogoff discusses these three planes as

being the community, interpersonal and personal (1995). Of key importance is the notion of the 'newcomer' learning from the 'old timer' in an apprenticeship model (Rogoff, 1994), where the changing roles of individuals are mutually defined with those of other people and with dynamic cultural processes (Rogoff et al., 1995, p. 45). Rogoff's thinking is framed by the notion that developmental research has focused on either the individual or the environment as being separate entities, and that examining the activity, rather than the individual, allows for a 'reformulation of the relation between the individual and the social and cultural environments in which each is inherently involved' (Rogoff, 2008, p. 59). She proposes three distinct yet inseparable planes (Rivalland, 2010, p 89) and discusses three developmental processes as corresponding with these planes of analysis as being 'apprenticeship', 'guided participation' and 'participatory appropriation' (Rogoff, 1995).

The process of apprenticeship is a community or institutional process in which the learner builds skills and knowledge by interacting within groups involving both peers and experts. The apprentice or novice (the newcomer) learns from the old timers, or more experienced members of the group. Apprenticeship as a concept focuses on a system of inter-personal involvements and arrangements in which 'people engage in culturally organised activity in which 'the apprentice becomes a more responsible participant' (Rogoff, 1995, p. 143). By viewing learning and development through this community plane, the activity can be analysed by focusing on the practices and the cultural institutions in which the activity occurs. In this study the practice of the educators is analysed at it relates to the broader organisational beliefs and approaches

of the setting, the organisational interpretation of the policy on family partnership and the cultural expectations and beliefs that have shaped the expectations of the families.

‘Guided participation’ is the term Rogoff applies to the interpersonal plane of analysis (1995, p. 147). Guided participation is the mutual involvement of individuals and their social partners as they communicate and coordinate their involvement in collective activity (1995; 2008). It focuses on a system of interpersonal engagements and arrangements – ‘the face to face and the more distal arrangements of peoples activities that do not require co-presence’ (Rogoff, 1995, p. 142); that is, the choices that are made regarding what and with whom the person is involved. The interpersonal plane of analysis examines the everyday practice and events that individuals engage in with others. In this study the interpersonal plane provides an analysis of the way the educators and the families engage in the everyday relationships, which can include the direct interaction with others as well as avoidance behaviours. The study then examines the shared endeavours with ‘specific familiar people ‘or distant unknown individuals, siblings and ancestors’ (Rogoff, 1995, p. 147). Guided participation includes both active and deliberate engagement in learning, as well as the incidental learning that arises as a result of observation, incidental comments and actions which are observed and in turn influence the learning and development of the individual and the group as they interdependently engage in activities and build practice. The approach to analysis in this study investigates the extent to which guided participation – both the overt and the incidental – by both the families and the educators, has influenced the nature of the relationships.

‘Participatory appropriation’ refers to the process by which individuals transform their understanding and responsibility for activities through their own participation. Rogoff bases her approach to analysing learning and development on a view that ‘through participation people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent activities’ (Rogoff, 1995, p. 150). The participation in the activity is the process for acquiring knowledge and skills, and relies on the extent to which these new knowledge and skills inform subsequent practice, as they are shaped by learning from the previous experiences. Participatory participation is the ‘personal plane’ of the analysis. This study examines the way participatory participation has influenced the extent to which the families’ and the educators’ practices and behaviours are dynamic and constantly changing as they engage in the cultural activity of the partnership, and build new understandings that have been shaped by their prior experiences and practices.

Using these three planes as three different lenses through which to examine the findings, the data are further analysed to gain an insight into the perspectives of the participants regarding the nature of the interactions that have been created and the influences that have shaped not only the understanding, but the practices. Constructivist epistemologies present a belief that knowledge is constructed through human interactions. Looking at the relationships through these lenses provides the researcher an understanding of how the knowledge and behaviour of the participants has been constructed and shaped by the social and cultural experiences that have shaped their own beliefs and behaviours across the institutional, interpersonal or personal planes of influence.

## 9.1 Identifying apprenticeship through the lens of the community plane

The notion of apprenticeship as being a process in which the learner builds skills and knowledge by interacting within groups involving both peers and experts is very strongly supported in analysing the practice of the educators. The interviews highlight the importance placed on the centre managers, particularly the senior manager, by their educators. There is a strong suggestion that the influence of the manager as an expert has created the understanding and behaviour of the educators across the centre. Kylie spoke about many of the educators undertaking their training at the same training institute:

We've all worked in the same environment and we've all been to the same school.  
Pretty much nearly all of us did our diplomas at [name of institute].

This is the institute where they encountered the manager who also taught there on a casual basis, with both Kylie and Susie opting to take casual work initially in order to work under the 'expertise' of the centre manager. Susie mentioned that she 'really wanted to work here, and then M could only offer me casual work, so that's how I got in here'. Connie also uses the expertise of the managers to inform her own practice, mentioning seeking advice from the manager:

If we can't address it in the room... we would call on our coordinator to help us.

While not explicitly related to the building of skills and knowledge, the influence of peers in influencing the behaviour and understanding, was also apparent:

Because we're working together, that means that we care for each other, and she wants me there, that makes me special. And all the girls the same. I mean, working here, together, we know all our families. And their families too (Rosa).



**Figure 12 Our journey so far – centre program information**

The participation of the centre as one of the trial sites for the VEYLDF created a setting in which the community plane and a notion of apprenticeship was apparent in guiding the practice of the educators. The language of the VEYLDF permeates throughout the conversations of the educators, who spoke frequently of the importance of parents in the lives of their children, of the curriculum they offer and the value of play. The displays and other documentation around the centre presented an organisational focus that informed the interactions between educators and parents, and these are evidence that VEYDLF has affected and shaped the organisational focus of the centre.

Examples include the inclusion of the learning outcomes in the way the programs were created, the way the learning stories were written linking to the framework and the invitation to bring in something from your culture – these reflect the nature and style of

the VEYDLF (Figure 8) philosophies in action. Connie in particular spoke of how she was sharing the new curriculum with families, and also how:

in one way we're talking more, you know, about the new curriculum... we always say to them, the whole thing with this new curriculum is play based.

From an organisational and community plane, the work undertaken in the process of participating as a trial site has created an opportunity for the educators to build skills and knowledge by interacting with one another to build individual knowledge and behaviour through greater organisational understanding.

The influence of the community plane in building knowledge and understanding was not just restricted to the educators. Vivienne openly acknowledged the learning she had gained from the interactions of the educators at the centre, and this had influenced her understandings of the nature of the relationships. She said that she felt:

the staff talked to me. The[y] worked together as a unit and gave me confidence as a parent.

She also identified that she felt the framework needed to be continued to be implemented and shared with parents now that there was new management. She saw the benefits it had created for herself and other families, and stated:

It was so exciting to see our centre being chosen for something like this, and it was so great to see the centre come together and become such a strong centre during this process.

Theresa built her own meanings about the relationships she had with the educators as a consequence of her interactions with the centre managers at a time when she saw herself very much as the apprentice in relation to her own son's additional needs:



The staff at the time had some training in this area notice differences, so we were just very lucky that they were on the ball.

It's the crèche who were the first to advise us, and had we not had that advice so early, I guess it could have taken us a lot longer to get in health [workers]... I needed a lot of feedback, we needed constant communication with the management here.

However, it was not just the expertise of the management that had created the meaning for Theresa; it was also the way that, from an organisational perspective, she viewed the interactions of the educators:

Sometimes the stuff they do come up with, you know, goes sort of a bit beyond, you know, just being about crèche.

These comments were mirrored by Alison, who also showed an understanding of the relationships as being based on her interactions at an organisational level. Across much of her interview she referred to 'they' in discussing the interactions she had with the educators:

I don't know what they do there, but I know they make her feel [special]... I think a lot of things they do to celebrate families... they've made this beautiful display about families which sits out the front. So the displays they have up, I can see the types of things that she's doing.

Sarah had an expectation of what she believed the nature of the interactions should be, and for her, much of this was influenced by her experience as a casual child care worker and educator. She measured her experiences at this centre with knowledge of other settings:

I know of another centre that would have interviews with the parents every term or semester. This was good, as it provided a time away from their responsibilities with the children for ten minutes where they could just talk with the parent.

She also discussed engaging with families in the context of ‘accreditation’, which reflects a broader community plane as building her understanding of the way the relationships between educators and parents should look.

The community plane can also be used when analysing the influence that the changes at the organisational level had on the nature of the interactions as felt by the parents. Until the centre management changed, Vivienne believed she had close partnerships based on mutuality and shared decision making, saying in regards the centre manager:

She knew everybody’s name as soon as they walked in the door. Or you always at least got a ‘Hi’. You always go acknowledged when you walked in the door, you always felt the warmth when you walked through the door.

However, in her mind, the organisational changes had impacted on the nature of the relationships she had with the centre:

Now, it always just feels like a cold place when you walk through the door.

When examining this belief through an understanding of her apprenticeship, it was apparent to Vivienne that it was the educators that were shaping their own interactions as a result of the behaviour of their peers, as well as those now in the leadership:

I feel everything flows from the top. It doesn’t matter what organisation it is, everything always flows from the top... How do we, as parents, feel like we can have a say or can have any involvement in the centre, in our child’s life, if the centre management itself can’t get it right? How do the staff feel like they can get it right or feel like they’re allowed to have a relationship with the parents, if they’re

supposed to be taking the example of management itself, if management itself aren't going to get it right?

## **9.2 Guided participation through the lens of the interpersonal plane**

Of most significant influence on the nature of the interactions between educators and parents in this study is the interpersonal plane of guided participation. Across each of the interviews it was apparent that it was the mutual involvement of both parents and educators that had created meaning and understanding for the individual participants. Guided participation is not just about formal instruction and formal learning; it is also a result of the incidental learning that comes from incidental comments, actions and observed behaviours by individuals, which in turn inform and build practice. In this study, individual understanding of the nature of the relationships is heavily influenced by the way the individuals perceived the actions, comments and behaviours of others. Looking through the lens of the interpersonal plane, it is clear that for Vivienne, the interactions and the mutuality of the relationships she had with the educators were a basis for her own feelings of empowerment and of building her own capacity as a parent:

The centre has taught me how to educate a baby from the day it's born from the rest of its life.

It was the nature of the mutuality, responsiveness and individualised facets of these interactions that shaped her understanding and created the relationships that were so empowering for her, and led to her feeling of loss when these no longer existed. The nature of the interpersonal interactions that she felt now currently existed, and the way she observed the other parent–educator interactions, resulted in her belief that the positive and empowering relationships no longer existed:

I don't see the parents that go in and drop off their kids in the babies' room. I don't see them stopping... Is that a by-product of the way the centre has turned, because they're not as open to asking for feedback... It used to be a family centre, it's just a day care centre now, and that's sad.

The interpersonal plane provides a lens through which to analyse the importance of the informal interactions and events in creating meaning for Theresa around the relationships she had with the educators. In relation to her son, she spoke of a more formal partnership, necessary to ensure that his specific needs were responded to. When speaking about her second child it was the less formal interactions that for her had influenced her beliefs and understanding. For Theresa, these relationships with the educators had created an understanding of the nature of the interactions:

It's very different. It's not as much hands on from me, it's more about what the staff are seeing and creating the environment here for her... aside from the kids as well we do talk socially about things outside the centre, and what our family's doing and what they're doing and if they've been on a holiday... I think because, probably because of the respect as well that we have for each other, and the way we interact and talk about the children, it does sound like a partnership.

The interpersonal relationships the educators have with each of their children also influenced and built meaning for the parents in the nature of their relationships with the educators. When examining the nature of learning as occurring through guided participation, the incidental learning that arises as a result of observation can influence the learning and development of the individual. In this instance, the observation by the parents of the interactions between the children and the educators supported their belief in how they defined their interactions with the educators. Alison told the researcher:

Yes, we're special! And that comes down to [the cook], who does the beautiful meals. She's very welcoming as well. She's very welcoming, always has a lovely

word to say to [daughter]... It's not just [daughter]'s special, it's everyone's special... I don't think it's special just for me, I think it's every child, because I've seen them behind me and in front of me giving the same interaction. And I think that's lovely. It's not fake.

Vivienne also very passionately remarked:

You see your kids relating to them, and you see your kids falling in love with them; you can't help but fall in love with them.

Rogoff identifies guided participation as being the mutual involvement of individuals and their social partners as they communicate and coordinate their involvement in collective activity (1995; 2008). In relation to this study, the mutual involvement of the parents and educators in the collective activity of the interactions between them not only created understanding for the parents, but also shaped the way the educators discussed the interactions they had with parents. Looking through the lens of the interpersonal plane, the meaning applied to the way the educators understand the nature of the interactions appears very different from that presented by the parents. The perceptions the educators gained of the nature of the interactions were strongly influenced by the way they interpreted the everyday practice of the parents.

Each of the educators spoke of different types of relationships they had with families, and was apparent that they determined the nature of these relationships based on the actions of the parents, incidental comments and observations that created their understanding. Susie in particular formed an understanding of whether she could describe the relationship as a partnership based on the nature of the interactions, expressing that she found some parents intimidating. The capacity of parents to engage in conversation with the educators is an indicator of whether or not the interactions

were seen in terms of a partnership. For the educators, parents who rushed in and out were not interested in a relationship that could be more firmly described in terms of a partnership framework.

A second indicator of whether or not the educators developed an understanding of the interactions as being within the context of a partnership was the sense of respect and value that the educators felt the parents demonstrated towards them, with several educators mentioning parents who saw them as babysitters, or who placed demands on them to keep the children clean and tidy, speaking of a parent who often questions the child's hair clips. On the other hand, the parents perceived as 'opening up' to the educators, or who sought information or feedback from the educators, were viewed as having closer relationships. Table 17 provides examples from the educators that support their reflections of the nature of the interactions as being guided by the observations and incidental actions of parents.

**Table 17 Educator reflections on the actions of parents**

<p>Kylie</p>	<p>[T]here's parents that I do have very close [relationships] with [who] will come to me for advice and to chat and to get my opinion, knowing that I have an education in early years. Whereas the parents that I don't have those strong partnerships with will still do things like [say], 'This wasn't done much, my child didn't...'</p> <p>I've had a lot of time to get to know the families that I do have good relationships with, and they've gotten to know me, things like family dinners and stuff – we've been able to sit down and chat.</p> <p>When I started I actually had a lot of trouble, being that I was only just eighteen, so I did have a trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for the fact that I was eighteen. And it didn't make a difference that I could do what I was doing and was doing well. Parents just seemed a little bit apprehensive.</p> <p>There are families that don't expect to have a partnership. That's not what they're after. You can tell the families that are wanting more from long day-care, more than just a place to take their child during the day.</p>
<p>Susie</p>	<p>For me, I think it's their willingness to open up to me... if a parent... doesn't come in and... say hello, or anything like that, they just walk and sign in and that... I try and make conversation. But if I don't feel they're wanting to talk back to me, then I suppose that's where the connection doesn't really happen.</p> <p>If they're sort of unwilling to talk to me, then I... feel like maybe I'm being too pushy or something. So I suppose you sort of back away.</p>

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And then we've got other families where you're friendly with the parents, and you're fine to talk to them, but there's still that sort of barrier where... I don't know...

And another family I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time. They don't want to talk to you. So I suppose because they're rushing in and out... I know it's not personal, but you just don't feel that connection.

You sort of feel a little bit intimidated... because they come across a bit as if they don't want to talk to you. You kind of shy away. I suppose it is intimidating as well. Because I am younger, I get a lot of, 'You don't know, because you're young'... I've got that in the back of my head. I... feel like maybe they don't want my opinion, or they don't want to interact.

Some parents... don't have any time for you or anything.

And... sometimes – I'm not saying all people think this – but because it is child care, they're like 'You're just a babysitter'. So they don't really have the time.

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Maria Of course they're all the same. If they ask me more, I'll help them more, of course. Families, other than [about] their child, they come and share their problems... some parents just drop the child off and then leave. So I have to treat them differently. When I first started here, I was still casual, I was relieving. This family, whatever I did, she didn't like me, you know? So I was greeting her in the morning, she was ignoring me, and when she brought her child she used to wait for another staff member to come in, like she didn't trust leaving him with me. And then not just me, because I'm not [from an] English-speaking background, I had another peer, so she treats all of us like that.

Yes, she trusts a certain background staff member. That makes me very sad... I try everything to develop a relationship with her, but she didn't want to. I tried everything, like my other friend tried too, but... she didn't want a good relationship... When she comes to pick him up I was talking about the child's day and she wasn't even listening. Of course I was upset at the time, but we couldn't change her.

I have this boy I've known since four months old, and he's got a beautiful family.

If they bring children happily here, I believe they think they are a partner with us. We treat everybody the same.

Some families demand very highly, just a few families I'll say.

You can't change people's personality. Personality problem, I think.

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Rosa The families that are having a hard time, I talk to them, become friends... give them advice if they want to.

Some parents... they talk, some parents they don't. That's the way they are. But sometimes when you get them to talk, get to know them, they are different people.

When they walk in in the morning I say, 'Yasou, yasou', and they like it. The families like it.

Still from the years before, I've got a good relationship with the families still going on. Every time, 'I haven't seen you in a long time', 'I'm in the toddlers' room, you can come see me, have a talk', you know.

Well, some parents think that 'I'm paying for this'. They have to be looked after.

Good or bad, you know, the ways that you talk to them, or some of them, they won't even answer you. Just... 'Hello, how are you?' – that's it, that's finished. But we are all here and prefer to talk, get to know them, their family. It's like, become a partnership.

Some parents don't even care what you do, you know, just walk in, walk to the sign in and out book, get their children, and 'Goodbye, see you tomorrow'. And that's it, you can't get more relationship, more partnership with them. You can't force them, that's the way they are.

But [parent] she's different with me, she doesn't have any relationship, just says 'Hello, how are you'. That's it.

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She's [another parent] telling me 'I want her to have the clips all day'. [I] have to be there when she picks her up... And that [has an] influence on the child and us... they've got more of [an attitude of]... 'You don't have to lose that [the hairclips], you don't have to do this, you don't have to say that'. You have to be careful with their parents... And the girls sometimes are, 'Oh, she's coming, be careful, she's coming to pick her up, get her top on, do this'.

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Alina I don't have the same kind of relationship that I do with the special needs families unless they want me to. But usually the special needs [parents] want me to talk about their child because I'm working with them one on one.

[Regarding a certain parent], because I can't talk to her and I get whoever to explain, she kind of leans towards [another educator] instead of coming back to me, to ask me the questions, so I don't know what kind of relationship that would be.

Maybe I'm too forward... sometimes you have a parent that goes on and on about a hair tie every day, and maybe it's the way I tell things to her, she doesn't want to talk to me anymore.

Because I've been with her for a few years now I know what she's going to say, I stop her straight away.

Sometimes I feel they treat us as a babysitter and just [have to] do what they say, some parents.

The ones that want to be [involved]. Some families are too busy to be involved.

I think if they stop and have time to talk to you about how his weekend went, you don't want all the details, just a little thing maybe, but it's kind of like 'Oh I'm late, I gotta go'.

He [a parent] doesn't want me to carry on – the look on his face. He wants me to stop now and that's all he wants, so I just leave it like that.

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Connie We've got families who come in and chat, chat, chat, and it's usually about whether they're having a bad day, or a good day, or a bad week, or whatever and I think well they wouldn't do that [if we didn't have a partnership].

With some new families, like I said, it just takes a while to form that real friendship. Some parents just drop off and go.

I suppose at the beginning... when you first meet them, they might come across as being a little bit... they have expectations. And like I said, until you form that trust and that friendship with them, families might... come across as a little bit... aggressive sometimes, or a little bit demanding.

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### **9.3 Participatory appropriation through the lens of a personal plane**

When examining the way the educators and parents constructed their understanding of the nature of the interactions from both an institutional and an interpersonal plane, the influence of the personal plane cannot be ignored. Based on a constructivist view of learning, Rogoff contends that the personal participation in activity enables people to change and such acquire new knowledge and skills, which she identifies as 'participatory appropriation' (1995). Such new knowledge and skills inform and build



new practice, learning from and being shaped by previous experiences. The personal or participatory experiences are in turn influenced by the interpersonal interactions that shape personal understanding, along with the institutional behaviours that led to the acquisition of personal knowledge understanding and beliefs.

In the context of this study, the personal plane provides a lens through which to identify the extent to which the individual participants have created their understanding of the nature of the interactions as a consequence of their personal experiences and beliefs. This personal plane – that of ‘participatory appropriation’ – had a strong influence on how each participant shaped their understanding. Each participant had a unique personal experience which they brought to, and in turn shaped, the interactions.

### **9.3.1 The personal plane as presented by the parents**

When analysing the interviews of the parents, each individual brought their own personal understanding to the way they reflected on the nature of the interactions. Using the lens of the personal plane, Sarah’s thinking and understanding were heavily influenced by her own thinking and knowledge based on her experience and understanding in the early childhood sector. She reflected that:

I think having a child care background I can appreciate what they do and how busy they are and how hard they work.

She also formed her beliefs based on what she felt the nature of the interactions should be from what she knew of practice in other settings:

Another centre used to have diaries. I know they are a lot of work, but I think they are good. I would love to have this... I know of another centre that would have interviews with the parents every term or semester. This was good, as it provided a

time away from their responsibilities with the children for ten minutes where they could just talk with the parent.

Sarah was a young articulate woman, from a Turkish background, studying for a psychology degree. She had two young sons who were cared for by her parents and parents-in-law when not at the centre. Much of her learning about herself and her role in the relationship was shaped by these life experiences. She saw the educators as co-facilitators in the decision making, because there had been instances where she had shared ideas and concerns which resulted in positive responses. However, her personal understanding of the role of parents in the partnership was also shaped by her personal plane, and she stated that she thought she had a role in sharing the decision making:

I didn't really think that I had a role of providing and adding input onto the program for my son.

Her personal understanding of the role of the parent in the partnership reflected that perhaps as a parent, she could have taken a greater role in building a shared understanding:

I could do more of sharing my information. I have a quiet personality. It has to be both ways – parents need to put in the effort. The main responsibility of parent the onus is on the parent.

Viewed through the personal plane, Theresa presented a different way of thinking. Theresa had two children who both attended the centre. Her older son, then at school, was diagnosed with a specific learning disability, while her younger daughter was a happy, well-adjusted five year old enjoying her time at the centre. Her son was diagnosed with learning needs while attending the centre in the toddler room. Coming from a European background, she was the first member of her extended family to have

used centre-based child care, which led to a level of apprehension from her own parents and extended family:

We've never had the experience in our families where someone's taken their kids to child care, so me and my husband are the first people in our families to ever do this. At first our parents were very apprehensive about that, and concerned about who was looking after the kids all day. And were there other children – will they get along with our children?

Her own personal experiences, generated also by her family's beliefs about child care, also had an influential impact on how she gained her understanding of the nature of the relationships. Much of her responses were a result of her own familial upbringing, and she used very poignant language to talk about her feelings regarding the relationships with the centre, saying that you need to 'know' the people you are leaving your child with because you are handing over your children to someone outside the family and want to have the confidence in who they are and they are going to relates to them as you would.

I like to feel comfortable when I'm entering a centre where my child's going to spend the whole day. I need to know the staff – not that I need to know everything about them specifically, but I need to feel that they are there for the right reasons, and you know that they're there to support the parents. They're there to communicate ideas, and you know, any concerns. Because... that's the only time you would do this, when you would leave your children for that amount of hours, because my husband and I both work.

For Theresa, the personal plane was very strongly influenced by the organisational and interpersonal planes that shaped her personal understanding and beliefs about the nature of the interactions as sitting within a partnership framework. Much of her conversation spoke of the organisation, in particular, the centre managers. There was

little reference to individual educators providing the daily care and interactions with her children, and most of the personal references relate to the manager and assistant manager. The organisational response to the identification and subsequent diagnosis created her personal understanding of the nature of the relationship. Theresa spoke of her relationship at the centre as being one of a partnership between herself and the centre managers, because it was these two women who first approached her regarding concerns they had in terms of her son's development. They had then worked closely with her through the subsequent referral and diagnosis stage until specialist services had been determined and brought in. She saw herself as part of the team in the way decisions were made for her son, and this relationship guided her personal understanding of the nature of the interactions:

The bond between ourselves and the staff here is quite close... They're very helpful and supportive, so I just felt, he was a very lucky boy to have this picked up... if it was the other way around, I guess I wouldn't have as strong a bond, it's kind of thrown us together, where we had to work together.

Interestingly, when discussing her daughter, this sense of partnership became less formalised. Theresa spoke of not needing a partnership because she had every confidence in the way the educators were working with her daughter:

She's quite different, so we haven't had to have as much interaction about [her] in terms of having regular meetings and things like that. With [her] we don't need to unless there's anything that comes up, and nothing really has come up, if anything needs to be spoken to we... get the information from the rooms and the staff in the rooms, and we'll... work on things with the staff directly in the room.

She also spoke of this relationship as being different from that of the more formalised partnership she had with her first child:

So it's very different. It's not as much hands on from me, it's more about what the staff are seeing and creating the environment here for her.

When examining the personal plane, her understanding of what a partnership looked like had been informed by the knowledge gained from her personal experiences with her son:

I definitely feel like I've got one [a partnership]. I know some parents who would agree as well, but I've personally for myself, I've felt that I've had that.

From this perspective she analysed the nature of the interactions as sitting within a partnership framework.

For Alison, it was the personal plane that had the most impact, and came across as most influential in analysing her interview. Alison brought a strong personal view to the way she reflected on the nature of the relationships. She defined herself in this personal plane where she saw herself as a single parent, a grieving daughter and as a teacher.

Viewing her reflection through a personal plane Alison had formed her understanding as a result of not only her personal feelings about the way she was treated and made to feel special, but also in response to the way her daughter was settled and learning.

Alison was also looking through her own belief system as a mechanism for reflecting on the relationship as she saw the educators being aligned to her own values and beliefs

I think so, I think we have similar beliefs, I'd say, so yes I think so.

Alison's personal plan was also influenced by the way she had seen and interpreted the relationships the educators had with one another, and she coupled this with her own personal experiences of working in a school setting:

I think they work well together as a team. I'd say, they're very supportive of one another from what I can see... they look like they enjoy their job, which I think is important. If you see happy staff, it's like a school ... And they're always smiling, I think that's what it is'.

The way she perceived the interactions with the educators and her daughter, along with that of other children, were also an influence on her personal plane:

I think it's just the way they treat one another. It's not just [daughter]'s special, it's everyone's special. I think it's every child, because I've seen them behind me and in front of me giving the same interaction and I think that's lovely. It's not fake. That warm feeling.

These observations led to her to believe in the nature of the interactions as being those where she was valued, respected and had a mutual partnership.

Alison's personal plane was largely influenced by her own defining of her identity and her observations of the educators interacting with one another and with children and families. However, much of Vivienne's thinking and understanding that shaped her personal learning was influenced by the interpersonal plane. She described herself as having grown in confidence and competence as a parent through her interactions with the educators who she credited as raising her children:

I credit them for raising my kids, really. You know, they taught me with my first on how to get a child into a routine, and the importance of having a child in a routine... they guided me through being a parent, they guided me through everything.

Vivienne presented as someone who was dealing with a sense of loss – the loss of a family friend or a close relative:

You know, my son leaves the centre at the end of this year, and it's going to break my heart. It's terribly painful, you know. At the end of the year – that's a seven-year relationship. They not only supported my kids, but supported me as a parent, as a person, as a family.

This was a woman who had shared some of her most intimate and personal family details with people from whom she gained support and to whom she entrusted her stories:

I separated from my husband, and the day that I did that I walked in the door and the staff knew straight away something was wrong. And they guided me through that. They guided my kids through that... They've varied from being just carers for my kids, to being guides for me as a parent, to being a support system through good and bad times.

Vivienne was a woman who had slowly built her own confidence and competence as a result of the relationships she had shared over the years with key people she had come to view as more than just her children's carers. This was key to her forming her personal plane in understanding the nature of the interactions she had with the educators.

As with Alison –the nature of the interactions between the educators and her children also informed Vivienne's personal plane:

You see your kids relating to them, and you see your kids falling in love with them; you can't help but fall in love with them... you see the kids relating to them, and because your kids relate to them so well, you feel comfortable with them.

These personal observations were critical in shaping her understating of how she viewed the nature of the interactions and had informed her personal understanding.

### 9.3.2 The personal plane as presented by the educators

Similar to the way that the parent experiences shaped the personal plane in creating their understanding of the nature of the interactions, so too were the personal experiences and beliefs of the educators instrumental in how they thought about and formed their own understanding of the nature of the interactions they had with families. Four of the educators were themselves parents, and of these educators, three identified being a parent as having a significant influence on the way they interact with families (Table 18).

**Table 18 Educator perceptions of the role that being a parent has on the relationships with families**

Rosa	I'm a family, I'm a parent, I'm a mother, so when I think about it, I want them to talk to me. When I got to my kids' school when they were in kinder, the things I didn't like, as a parent, I put myself into their shoes first. Most of the parents are happy that I am a mum, because I always say things like 'I know how you feel, I am a mother'. It's like, give me an extra thing that I'm a mum, parent, family.
Alina	Researcher: So what do you think are the biggest influences on the way you interact with families? Alina: I think my personal life. I think my own children. The questions I had when my children were this age... I didn't know how to ask somebody appropriately... Now I know how to answer their questions in a way that's not going to offend them.
Connie	Well, I'm a mother, and a nana, and live in the community. I live in [another suburb in the municipality], so when I work here I feel like I'm part of this community. So you know, you're part of that community.

Interestingly, although Maria was also a parent of young adult children, she didn't identify this as being an influencing factor in the way she had created her understanding of how to interact with families.

Four of the educators came from cultural backgrounds other than Australian, and spoke a language other than English. Three of these educators identified their cultural background as important and being an influencing factor in creating the personal plane



that had formed their understanding. They saw themselves in a role of ‘help giver’ (Trivette et al., 2010) because they were able to guide families in supporting children’s home language, in creating learning stories and in communicating with families in their home language (Table 19).

**Table 19 Educators as ‘help givers’**

Maria	Most of them these days, they can speak English as well. I have a few families coming in that can speak both English and Turkish. To me it’s the same, if they sometimes need to interpret, I don’t mind Turkish or whatever, this is the multiculturalism
Rosa	Well, we’ve got Greeks, Greek families, and we got Italians. I work with Italians at the factory and the Greeks. I learned a little bit of their language. And I’m still trying to get the words from them, to teach their children their language. When they walk in in the morning I say, ‘Yasou, yasou’, and they like it. The families like it. Because I’m a Turkish speaker, another language is giving me options, and the parents are so happy
Connie	We actually do learning stories in the family’s language if we can. Rosa’s doing Turkish, I’m doing Italian, so each one if we’ve got a child whose family is predominately Italian we try and to a little story in Italian.

While Alina also came from a European background, she did not identify this in her interview as an influencing factor on how she had created her own understanding of relating to families. To the contrary, she stated:

Some of them are starting to learn a bit of English, so I talk to them the way I’d talk to anyone, and if they don’t understand me, I’ll carry on talking the same way in the same tone, and maybe sometime soon they’ll understand.

Culture and past experiences were particularly prominent in building the personal plane for Rosa. She identified as a Muslim woman and this influenced her personal plane, as she spoke of how she shared religious celebrations in common with families:

But as I’m a woman, and about my religion and the way I talk, I can be open to ladies more than the man, you know. I’ve got a good relationship with the husband. Every time he comes in he’ll talk about religion, because we celebrate the same

celebrations, and then we talk about fasting. We start fasting before them. They're Lebanese, we're Turkish – we start one day before.

This empathy and sharing of common experiences built the sense of reciprocity and mutuality that was apparent in the relationships that Rosa had built with families.

Of the six educators participating in the study, two were twenty-two year old women who had both been at the centre for a short while, both having diploma-level qualifications. These two educators both identified as having an Australian culture, and neither spoke a language other than English. Unlike the other four educators, neither of these two women were married or had children.

When reflecting on Kylie through the lens of the personal plane, it is clear that her participatory appropriation and personal understanding was shaped by her experiences as a young adult. Kylie spoke of feeling apprehensive with some families when she first started in the sector, because she felt they questioned her capabilities due to her age. However, there was the sense that these experiences, along with her own personal life experiences, created her capacity to engage with families and feel confident in these relationships.

When I started I actually had a lot of trouble, being that I was only just eighteen. So I did have a trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for the fact that I was eighteen. And it didn't make a difference that I could do what I was doing and was doing well. Parents just seemed a little bit apprehensive about... they've left their child in the care of an eighteen year old. But it didn't take me long to get over it, and once families got to know me, it was irrelevant.

Kylie's personal understanding was also influenced by the interpersonal relationships she had already formed and built through having had time to develop an understanding of the individual families.

So a lot of the kids I have this year I've known since they were two. So I've been able to form really good relationships with their parents, purely because I've cared for them since they were young.

Interestingly, Kylie spoke of having more superficial relationships with families for whom English is not their first language. Here, the interpersonal and the personal planes intersected. Her personal belief and experience were shaped by the interpersonal interactions, but the way she analysed these collaborations was shaped by her personal understanding of what she believed the nature of the interactions should be.

So that's where I struggle to form relationships with them, because I can't talk to them ...

In contrast, Susie did not share the same connections between her own experiences and how these had influenced her understanding of the way she interacted with families.

Susie had three years' experience as an early childhood educator. As was the case for Kylie, Susie also studied her diploma qualification at the local TAFE and had had, as one of her teachers, the centre manager, who taught on a casual basis in the course.

Unlike Kylie, however, she studied full time on completion of her schooling, and then commenced her role as an educator, working for three months at a different centre until a position became available at this centre, where she had determined she wanted to work.

When looking through the lens of the personal plane to analyse the personal experiences which influenced her understanding of the relationships, Susie did not show the same insight into her knowledge as being shaped by her participatory appropriation as did Kylie, and came across during the interview as being less confident and not having as strong a self-belief as Kylie. While Kylie could describe the influence of her own life experiences on the nature of the relationships she had formed with families, when asked a similar question about how her own personal experience influenced the relationships, Susie spoke of individual engagement with families based on a common interest as shaping the nature of the interactions:

Researcher: What about things... in your own personal life experiences. Do you feel they've influenced in any way the way you interact with families? Or your experiences or training?

Susie: I think it does. For example, one of the parents is into real estate and stuff like that, so I've got to talk to him about houses, and we sort of connected through that because I'm at that stage where I'm going to be buying a house, that's sort of one of my experiences how I've bonded. Another family lives up in the bush area like me, so I can sort of talk about that kind of thing with them, things that I do find we have in common, that sort of helps you to connect with some families.

Like for Kylie, Susie's personal understanding of the nature of the interactions was also influenced by her own self-belief about her self-confidence and maturity; but unlike Kylie, who presented as a confident and self-assured, Susie had doubts about how she thought she was perceived by many families.

I think because they come across a bit as if they don't want to talk to you, you kind of shy away, and I suppose it is intimidating as well. Because I am younger, I get a lot of, 'You don't know, because you're young'. And so I think in that respect I suppose I need to mature a little bit in that way, because I've got that in the back of

my head. I sort of feel like maybe they don't want my opinion, or they don't want to interact.

Susie also spoke about the relationships she had with families for whom English is not their first language. With these families she did not have the funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) from which to draw order to build a personal understanding of how to interact in a more satisfying way.

For me (I know this is bad), for me it's also language barriers. Sometimes when I can't communicate to the families, if they're... non-speaking English or something... I find it hard to communicate to them. So it's hard to form that connection with them as well... We've got some staff that do speak their language or whatever, but they might not be here that time that I want to communicate to them... I don't know ways that I can... communicate without having that other person.

Susie's personal plane was influenced by the interconnecting knowledge and understanding shaped by the interpersonal and institutional planes. She spoke of finding some families intimidating ('because you sort of feel a little bit intimidated'); or scary ('some are a bit scary...'), leading her to form an opinion of her own personal behaviour based on how she perceived her actions being interpreted by others:

If they're... unwilling to talk to me, then I... feel like maybe I'm being too pushy or something... you sort of back away... I think it's their willingness to open up to me, like if a parent kind of doesn't come in and... say hello, or anything like that, they just walk and sign in and that, like I try and make conversation. but if I don't feel they're wanting to talk back to me, then I suppose that's where the connection doesn't really happen.

The institutional plane had also affected her personal understanding, and she spoke of studying for her teaching degree where she mentioned that the importance of

relationships with families and partnerships with parents were key aspects of the course:

Well, because I'm studying my bachelor as well, they just... drum that through your lectures and stuff like that, the importance of it.

However, she did not reflect on other learning that had been gained from a broader institutional plane.

Socio-cultural theory offers a way of analysing the behaviours and practices of the participants to examine the influencing factors that have impacted on the nature of the interactions as they occur. Each of the participants' behaviour had been shaped by their interactions, experiences and understandings derived from participating in broad social and cultural contexts, and for each of these individuals their unique experiences had shaped their thinking and practice.

The following chapters provide a deeper discussion of the analysis and the findings by linking back to the research questions. Chapter 10 presents an extensive discussion on how effective the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators is in developing genuine partnerships between the educators and the parents. It centres first on a partnership framework and then further examines the interactions between parents and educators as they reflect FCP.

## **Chapter 10 Partnerships and FCP – describing the interactions**

The aim of this research is to investigate the nature of the interactions between parents and educators in an ECE&C setting to provide an understanding of the extent to which these interactions may be defined as FCP. The following two chapters were designed around the research questions. This chapter begins by discussing the analysis and findings, providing an insight into whether the nature of the interactions between the educators and the parents can indeed be described as a genuine partnership. By positioning this study within a theoretical construct of partnership as having mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Kruger et al., 2009; Keen, 2007), this chapter presents an extensive discussion that responds to the question of how effective is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing partnerships between them.

The chapter examines the extent to which these interactions are in reality a genuine partnership, or are a perceived partnership that has been interpreted as such by the participants. The study then investigates the extent to which the interactions can be defined as FCP. The second part of this chapter critically discusses the findings to further an understanding of how effectively this model was being implemented in the study site. The extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators had been influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants is the focus of the following chapter.

## **10.1 The interactions as they sit within a partnership framework**

When positioning partnership within a construct that encompasses mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making, it is clear that in some ways the interactions are reflective of this position. However, the depth to which these characteristics are present in the interactions between the participants warrants further analysis. It is true that the participants all perceived that the interactions they had with one another can be described as a partnership, but on deeper analysis, this perception has been constructed based on relational connections, rather than through a critical analysis of what constitutes a genuine partnership.

The way each of these participants viewed and understood the essence of partnership was shaped by their subjective realities and their construction of meaning derived from social interactions, and through this perspective, it is easy to see that for each of the participants – either parent or educator – there was a belief that the interactions were that of a partnership. Trust was central to the way the parents all spoke of the relationships they had with the educators, and this was also what they placed most value on, because they wanted to be reassured by those they were entrusting their child to. The parents believed they had formed trusting relationships with the educators, which had been built through the way they perceived the educators had responded to their needs. Each of the parents provided insight into difficult periods of their lives that they felt they had been supported by the educators. The sense of trust was also strengthened through the way the parents felt they were kept informed about their child, and had received timely advice when they sought help and support in their parenting. While not specifically discussed, there was an intrinsic sense of being



respected by the educators, because they all spoke of being welcomed and feeling included, and this feeling of being respected contributed to a sense of trust by the parents.

However, the essence of a trusting relationship is viewed differently when examining the partnership from the perspective of the educators. As it is reflected in the interactions of the educators, trust was measured by the level to which the educators trusted that the parents would be responsive to the expectations they held for the role of the parent. The educators did feel that the relationships that they formed with parents needed to be predicated on trust – a trust on behalf of the families in the role and expertise of the educators in caring for their child. The educators very much perceived their role as being the expert or help giver in the relationship they had with the families, and as such, had an expectation that the parents would seek or follow their advice, or would provide them with information about the child to support their own planning and interactions with this child in the context of the centre. The educators saw much of their role with families as that of sharing information about the child, child development and parenting (Hujala et al., 2009; Reedy & McGrath, 2010), and from their perspective, trusting relationships were those where the families created the context where this could occur. There was a major emphasis by the educators on the importance of respectful relationships, and having a connection with the families, but unlike through the parents' perspectives, these respectful relationships did not translate to the same sense of trust of the parents as the parents' trust in the educators. There was not a sense of reciprocity when examining the ways that the educators spoke of trusting relationships as there was with the parents, who viewed this as paramount.

Contrary to these views was the perspective of trust presented by educators whose sense of validation as experts had not been supported by some parents (Rouse, 2012b, p. 19). Interwoven in the conversations of the educators was a strong sense that some of the educators did not feel that they were trusted or respected by some of the families. They stated that they felt they were being treated as times a babysitters, and at one point described some of the parents as 'scary'. These perceptions present a notion of the interactions not being mutual or reciprocal.

As discussed previously, this present study specifically examines the nature of the interactions between parents and educators by exploring the meaning attached to the interactions by the individual participants in the context of their own constructed realities. In social groupings the actions and activities of members of the group impact on, and are responded to, by others in the group, and are seen in terms of their relationships to one another. They create a framework for viewing learning and behaviour as being shaped by the interactions, experiences and understandings derived from participating in this broad social and cultural context. In the context of examining how the participants viewed and constructed their own realities of the nature of the interactions,

[the] individual cannot be studied in isolation from the social, and... the individual, interpersonal and cultural process are not independent entities (Rogoff, 1998, p. 687).

The way that trust was positioned within this study can be examined through these three planes. The sense of trust that the parents found in the educators was influenced by the meanings which they placed on the interactions they constructed though

engaging in interpersonal social interactions with the educators. The perspective of the educators has also been influenced by the meaning they constructed through the dyadic relationship that occurred with these parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as characterised by their perceptions of the reciprocal relationships, which in some instances they perceived as untrusting.

While the element of trust as underpinning a partnership framework can be identified as framing the interactions within a context of partnership, the other characteristics were less easy to identify. The families' perceived reality was that they were mutual participants in the shared goals and decision making, presenting a perception of mutuality, and it could be argued that this was also the perceived reality of the educators. Examination of the findings, however, produces an alternative perception or reality, in that the parents were not in reality sharing in the decision making, or determining the goals for their child. This became particularly evident when examining the shared decision about the toilet training. Each of the parents believed they had been key players in the decisions to toilet train their children. Each parent also described a sense of reluctance in the timing and developmental efficacy of this when introduced by the educators; however, they went along with the decision and the program in positioning the educator as that of more knowledgeable expert (Rouse, 2012, p. 7).

The educators felt that they and the families were both working towards the same goals. There was little discussion relating to how these shared goals had been mutually arrived at, or decisions mutually determined. The educators spoke extensively of the sharing of information to better support their interactions with the child; however, this did not really reflect a sharing of decision making. The educators did perceive that they

engaged the families in shared decision making. Kylie described her approach with families as:

recognising what the family want and what they require from us, and being able to work around that, or with them, to accomplish the same goals.

This in itself does not necessarily constitute shared decision making or mutually agreed goals – only a recognition of what they perceived the goals to be without a discussion on how they had been arrived at. In contrast, Alina said that she believed that the parents should follow her lead in goal setting and decisions making regarding the child, regardless of the parents’ goals and decisions, reinforcing that parents were not active decision makers.

So in response to the question ‘How effective is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between them, as determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity?’, it is critical to revisit the theoretical perspective driving the study. The research has been framed by symbolic interactionism. Within this framework there is a strong perception of there being ‘genuine partnerships’, based on a constructed reality of how the participants perceived the relationships as being that of a partnership. As discussed previously, when using a symbolic interactionist lens to examine the constructed realities, the world of lived reality and situation-specific meaning is constructed by

‘social actors’ who fashion meaning out of events and prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language and action (Schwandt, 1994, p. 7).

Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings and realities they have constructed in response to the interactions with this social group. The reality for the parents in the study is that there was a genuine partnership. The educators perceive that this exists with most of the families utilising the centre; however, there were still families who were perceived by the educators as being not interested or not capable of forming a partnership. These perceptions were based in the dyadic interpersonal relationships they believed have been constructed. Looking at these perceptions through Rogoff's interpersonal plane, some families were seen as being in a genuine partnership – those with whom the educators had a strong connection, usually by being physically present, sharing information and following through their suggestions. The parents sitting outside this constructed reality were viewed differently, because the educators were behaving towards these parents on the basis of the meanings they had constructed in response to how they perceived the nature of the interactions to be. This group of parents was viewed as not wanting to be engaged in a partnership, or difficult to partner with in the context of the individual educators' own personal understanding of the nature of the interactions.

If one is to superimpose the partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity over the top of the findings, we may subjectively argue that the interactions, as analysed, do not reflect a genuine partnership, because all, or even most, of these elements are present in the findings as interpreted by the researcher. In symbolic interactionism, the 'actor', as noted in Chapter 7, puts themselves in the place of the other, and in doing so they use their own 'reality'. The actor interprets understanding, and a subjective empathic understanding of meaning is given. If one is to view the

researcher of the present study from the position of that of the ‘actor’, then her subjective understanding of the meaning is that the interactions do not reflect the essence of a genuine partnership. In her constructed reality the interactions are not reflective of a mutuality and reciprocity in the way the interactions are enacted, and there is not clear and apparent indication that the educators are indeed engaging with the parents as shared decision makers. The nature of the interactions are bounded in the opportunities that the educators create for the families to engage in mutual interactions, but the meaning placed on this by the researcher is that these are governed and mediated by the educators defining what the interactions look like and consist of.

On a deeper level, it is interesting the way the partnership was described by Alison. She recalled a time when her daughter, who the centre were toilet training despite her hesitation regarding this, wet and ruined her new fur-lined boots. She saw this as a great example of a respectful mutual partnership, because even though she dissolved in tears, she believed the educators were laughing *with* her.

## **10.2 The interactions as they can be defined as FCP**

While the national framework spoke to educators of forming partnerships with families that are ‘based on the foundations of understanding each other’s expectations and attitudes, and build on the strength of one another’s knowledge’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13), the VEYLDF delineates FCP as the model of partnership which will be implemented by educators. The capacity for educators to work within this model is predicated by the extent to which they understand the underpinning core principles and characteristics inherent within the model that positions it within a partnership framework. Because of this focus by the Victorian Government on FCP, the study

sought to analyse the data to examine the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators can be defined in this context.

### **10.2.1 Family-centred practice and the VEYLDF**

When FCP was included in the VEYLDF, little was known and understood by the non-interventionist ECE&C sector as to what this encompassed. Educators were reliant on those responsible for its inclusion, building this understanding. The Victorian Framework, as a first point of reference, positioned FCP in the context of a broad category of practice principles listed as ‘collaborative’ (DEECD, 2009, p. 9). Within this context the term ‘partnership’ is not used. In the document, educators are guided to understand FCP through an acknowledgement and acceptance that:

children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children’s learning and development [and] by respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives (DEECD, 2009, p. 10).

Further guidance on how to implement this model is somewhat sketchy within the document, with only four points that identify how this might be enacted in practice. The following expressions are the way educators are introduced to FCP within the framework:

use families’ understandings to support shared decision making

create welcoming and inclusive environments

families [are] encouraged to participate in and contribute to children’s learning and development experiences

actively engage families in planning

provide feedback on how families can enhance children's learning and development at home.

This introduction to FCP in the VEYLDF provides a somewhat necessary overview of FCP, but does not really provide the educator with a deep understanding of the core principles and underpinning philosophy that guides the practice within a broader partnership context. The model presented in Chapter 6 provides a lens through which to examine the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they sit within the context of FCP. To gain a deeper understanding, it is important to appreciate the interconnections that exist between the core principles, the characteristics and the practice behaviours. FCP is underpinned by the philosophy that families are pivotal in the lives of children and should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children, and this belief in turn guides the practice of the practitioners. There is strong evidence from the findings that both the educators and the parents in this study believed there was a strong acknowledgement that the families were seen as pivotal in the lives of their children. The parents spoke of having trust in the educators, and in this researcher's view, a component of developing this trust was a result of the educators creating the sense that parents were seen as important. The parents expressed the sense that they felt respected by the educators sharing information with them about the happenings at the centre, and they felt the educators also valued them sharing information about their children. The voices of the educators were more explicit in the way they spoke of the role of parents, with Kylie stating that the philosophy of the centre had 'always recognised parents as the first educators in their children's lives', and it was obviously a strong, underpinning value of educators



working in this centre. A common theme running through the voices of the educators was that of recognising the importance of the family in children's lives.

Here, the evidence defining the interactions as FCP becomes more obscure, because many of the core principles and characteristics implicit in partnership approach are absent from the findings. The underlying philosophy that frames FCP is not only that families are pivotal in the lives of children, but a recognition that families should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children.

### **10.2.2 Parents as decision makers**

As discussed in the review of the literature, FCP has its theoretical basis in both Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and a family systems theory (Dunst et al., 1988; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Özdemir, 2007;), recognising as core the notion that children exist within a wider context of family, community and society. In an ecological system, the child, the family and the environment are inseparable (Holland & Kilpatrick, 2006), and what affects one member of the system impacts on the other members (Brown et al., 1993; Keen, 2007; Law, 1998). A further core principle underpinning FCP is the acknowledgement that all families possess certain strengths. Building on these strengths, families should be empowered as active and equal partners in decision making for their child (Brewer et al., 1989; Bruder, 2000). These core principles provide a focus through which to examine further the interactions between the parents and the educators to explore more deeply the extent to which the interactions are reflective of FCP.

Absent in the findings is the notion of shared decision making and an acknowledgement by both the educators and the parents that all families have strengths.

Throughout the findings the parents frequently presented as deferential when speaking of the educators, who, in Vivienne's belief, were credited with raising their children. Nearly all the parents spoke of deferring to the educators in regards decisions relating to their children, and very much saw the educators in an expert role, not recognising or calling on their own strengths in the expert knowledge they themselves held in regards their children. The educators did not identify the families from this strengths-based approach, instead at times appearing to perpetuate a notion of themselves as the expert, as was evidenced by the conversation Vivienne held with the educator about her wanting to teach her child to read.

The model of FCP centres on the notion that families come to the relationship with the professionals with existing strengths and competence, but seek help from the professionals to access resources and participate in decision making. In the relationships in this study between the educators and the parents, this notion is perpetuated. Each of the parents sought out the perceived expertise of the educator, or deferred to the educators as expert in aspects of parenting and child development. For Theresa, it was the expertise she credited the educators as having in identifying her son's disability. For Alison, it was being a single parent and her own sense of vulnerability at the death of her mother which positioned the educators as 'help givers'. The educators themselves presented to the parents a view that they had knowledge of child development and children's learning that was outside the expertise of the families. Given that the educators were drawing on their own 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al., 2013), constructed through experience and training in early childhood development, this positioning of themselves as 'help giver', is understandable.

The model of FCP also argues that all families have strengths, and by empowering families to draw on these strengths they can be enabled as decision makers in decisions relating to their child. This aspect did not seem to be apparent in the interactions of the educators towards the families. It is interesting that nevertheless, the families felt that they were key partners in decision making and felt empowered to engage in this role.

### **10.2.3 Parents as empowered partners**

Dempsey & Foreman (1997) identify several components that need to be present when an individual is empowered: having strong self-efficacy, participation and collaboration, and a sense of control. When examining empowerment through a symbolic interactionist perspective, empowerment can mean different things to different people, as determined by their past experiences, across time and settings and the population that is targeted (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). This is important to consider when examining and determining an individual's level of empowerment, because what one may define and identify as empowerment or disempowerment may be a result of social, political or historical characteristics, and others may assign different meanings. The level to which empowerment has been achieved can be gauged by examining the individual's beliefs about their own sense of control and competency. What may appear to the professionals as being 'enabling behaviours' may be viewed very differently by families. Their sense of personal self-efficacy, the socio-cultural experiences and beliefs they bring to the relationship with the professionals, and the dynamics of the relationship and broader socio-political environment determines the extent they feel enabled in the decision making process.

In this study, each of the parents offer evidence that they felt they were empowered decision makers, even though the evidence presented may not support this. This is exemplified by the scenario of an additional health worker being brought into work with Theresa's son, or in the situation of her child being toilet trained although she felt developmentally he was not ready for this. If empowerment is not measured just as a process, but also as an outcome, as discussed by Boehm & Staples (2004), then we may argue that the outcome that has come about as a consequence of the trusting and respectful relationships the parents have formed with the educators may indicate that these parents do in fact view themselves as empowered decision makers. This persists, even if the evidence suggests they are not active partners in the decision making that is being undertaken in regards their children.

#### **10.2.4 Characteristics of FCP and educator relational behaviours**

The core principles of FCP are enacted by relationships and interactions characterised as being culturally sensitive, inclusive and reciprocal, recognising and respecting one another's knowledge and expertise, and allowing for informed family choice. There is a sharing of unbiased and complete information by practitioners, and parent involvement is meaningful, individualised, flexible, coordinated and responsive (Rouse, 2012a).

There is strong evidence in the findings to suggest that the interactions between the educators and the parents could be described as inclusive and reciprocal. For the educators, at least, there is a belief that they are culturally sensitive. The educators strongly emphasised the importance of relationships that are respectful of and responsive to cultural diversity, and throughout their conversations, examples of how these were enacted were clearly evident. This cultural responsiveness was also

recognised and valued by the parents, in the way they spoke of the educators and the relationship that had been fostered. Here, too, the educators presented a belief that they created an environment for families where interactions and decision making was individualised, flexible, coordinated and responsive. However, while this might be a belief of the educators, and is evident in the nature of the interactions (the relational behaviours), the extent to which this flexibility relates to joint decision making undertaken in a shared partnership is questionable. In contrast, the individualised nature of the decisions was informed by the goals, expectations and understandings of the educators regarding what they saw was in the best interests of the child.

There is little evidence of families having access to unbiased and complete information by the educators. The examples presented by the parents such as the situations regarding the toileting, or the learning to read, question whether the parents were empowered to make informed choices as a result of a sharing of unbiased and complete information by practitioners. The decision making and choices in both these scenarios were driven by the educators and informed by the educator identifying what they believed to be in the best interests of the child. There is little to indicate that the educators were unbiased in their interactions with the parents, drawing on their own beliefs and values of what they felt were important, relevant and developmentally appropriate, and in fact dismissing the contributions of the parents.

Relational behaviours are not only demonstrated in the way the educators create an environment in which interactions are culturally responsive, inclusive and reciprocal, but are present in the interpersonal behaviours that govern the interactions between the educator and the parent. Such behaviours include empathy, active listening and being

non-judgemental, as well as ‘the crafting of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships’ (Barrera & Corso, 2002). This is a focus of the educators’ behaviours and practice, who present, through their discussions, a sense of empathy and of being non-judgemental towards the parents and the families, recognising and responding empathetically and sensitively to the parents in times of vulnerability. It was also certainly the view of the parents in the study, who created a sense of the relationship as a result of these empathetic interactions. However, these relational behaviours can also be exhibited in the way the educators create relationships that recognise and build on family strengths (Swick et al., 2006). FCP is built on a strengths-based model, centring on the notion that all families have existing strengths and capabilities, as well as the capacity to become more competent (Rappaport, 1981; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Boehm & Staples, 2004). Recognising that all families have strengths, the reciprocal nature of FCP invites families to enhance the learning of educators, gaining insight from the expertise held by the parents on the uniqueness of their child. While the relational practices of the educators in this present study support interpersonal behaviours that create interactions bounded by respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships, recognising and building on existing family strengths has not been demonstrated by the educators, who seemed to view themselves in the dyad as being a ‘help giver’ to the family as ‘help seeker’. Also, there was little acknowledgement of the parent in the context of them being a ‘more knowledgeable other’ in regards creating a shared understanding of their child. The lack of these enabling behaviours in the relational practices of the educators creates further gaps in the capacity to describe the interactions as FCP.

### **10.2.5 Characteristics of FCP and educator participatory behaviours**

Fundamental to FCP is the distinction between relational and participatory practice behaviours (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst et al., 2007; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). For FCP to be effectively enacted, both participatory as well as relational behaviours are present in the practice of the practitioner. Participatory practices as presented in the literature are those that focus on the involvement of the ‘help seeker’ – practices such as those that enable families to be actively involved in the decision making process, and provide them with opportunities to discuss options. Participatory practices also include the family as active participants in meeting desired outcomes and strengthening existing competencies. The participatory behaviour of the educators enables this to occur, including the way the educator creates an environment where the family are enabled and validated in their role as decision makers, which is seen as being essential in the enactment of FCP.

The relational behaviours of the educators in this study do support the understanding of the interactions as reflecting many of the characteristics present in FCP. The description of the interactions presented by both educators and parents present a sense of culturally sensitive, inclusive and reciprocal interactions. The participatory behaviours present in FCP, however, create the environment in which parents and educators are enabled to share decision making – in which there is informed family choice and a sharing of complete and unbiased information.

Participatory behaviours are those practices demonstrated by the educators that empower the parent to actively engage and participate in shared decision making and mutual goal setting, through creating an environment and opportunities to discuss

options, in unbiased and informed ways. Coming from a strengths-based perspective, the educator understands that parents know their child better than anyone else, and actively enables the participation of the families in enhancing the learning they, as educators, gain from the expertise of the parents regarding the uniqueness of their child. In order to make families as empowered as equal and respected partners in the decision making, not only must practitioners ensure positive and affirming relationships are formed with families, but also that meaningful participation in all aspects of the decision making and problem solving is enabled (Rouse, 2012).

In this study, these participatory practices are not evident in the behaviours of the educators. Within the context of the centre, the environment has been created as one that reinforces the notion of the educator as ‘help giver’ – the educator who has the knowledge and understanding that drives the decision making for the children. While parents may feel they are active and equal decision makers, the participatory practices of the educators negate this. Opportunities for meaningful involvement in the decision-making process are driven by the educators determining how they identify what is meaningful for the families. This became quite evident in the example of Vivienne wanting to teach her child to read. While she had several ideas that she wanted to work with, the educators negated these ideas, introducing a new approach. While these educators did have a level of understanding of how children learn to read which was different from that of the parent, encouraging her to work with her own ideas at home, supporting her with her choices and building her knowledge by sharing what they were doing in in the centre would have demonstrated a greater capacity for shared decision making. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the way the educators understand



and seek meaningful involvement differs from that of the families. While the parents spoke of the importance for them of the social opportunities to engage with educators, where they could get to know the person caring for and educating their child, and build mutual relationships, the educators raised as a concern the majority of parents who did not participate in sessions planned around parenting and child development. The parents viewed meaningful involvement from the perspective of the connections they created with the educators, while for the educators, meaningful involvement was more technical, in that it was determined by parents' engagement with opportunities provided by the educators for parents to build the skills and knowledge of young children.

Zimmerman (1990) argues that 'at the individual level, empowerment includes participatory behaviour' (p. 169). If FCP is predicated on parents as empowered decision makers, an environment where they are enabled and supported to build strength and confidence in participating in this decision making needs to be fostered and enabled through the behaviours of the educators in creating the context for the parents to become equal participants in determining the decisions for their child.

#### **10.2.6 Characteristics of FCP as found in the documents and artefacts**

The documents and artefacts provided to families provide a further insight into the way the educators create an environment that enabled the sharing of unbiased and complete information by practitioners and a reciprocal sharing of knowledge and understanding. An examination of the range of collected artefacts – the newsletters, the parent display boards, the policies, the programs and the children's' assessments and learning portfolios, reveals little evidence of the reciprocal nature of the parents as shared partners in the decision making, or as being recognised as having strengths and

knowledge relating to their children. Although they are complying with the VEYLDF as they are providing feedback to families on their children's learning children's learning and development this is not a mutually reciprocal partnership.

Using Rogoff's institutional lens as impacting on the learned behaviours of the educators, we might ask if this is how the policy makers have defined and presented FCP to the sector, then it is clear that the educators are enacting this approach as they have been led to understand it. The documents and artefacts provide a strong insight into the way the educators shared their own knowledge and understanding of child development and learning with the families, engaged the families in the centre, and provided them with information to enable them to be active participants in the day-to-day happenings of the organisation.

Only when looking more deeply into the characteristics and underlying principles of FCP can it be argued that this is not fully creating a partnership with families that is predicated on a *reciprocal* sharing of knowledge and understanding, or a recognising and respecting of the knowledge and expertise held by the parents. While there is a sharing of information on the part of the educators through the displays and documents created for the families to keep them informed, the term 'shared' presents a sense of reciprocity, a two-way process. It was apparent from examining the documents and artefacts that the parents had not contributed to the information sharing, the discussions or the decisions. While it might be suggested that the parents had the opportunity to take a role in this, the design and content did not create an opportunity where parents could feel empowered or be encouraged to participate in a meaningful way.

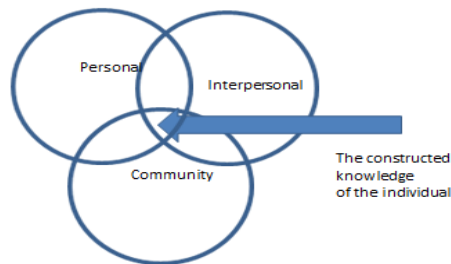
In this chapter the nature of the interactions as they sit with in a partnership framework are further explored, examining these as they can be described as FCP. Of interest to this study is to explore the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators have been influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants. The following chapter explores this in depth, drawing a picture of the participants as they have been shaped and influenced by their social cultural experiences, and further drawing on Rogoff's three planes of learning to shape the discussion.

## **Chapter 11 The influence of the socio-cultural experiences on the nature of the interactions between educators and families**

The three planes to describe learning as presented by Rogoff (1995) provide windows through which to gain a deeper understanding of the influences that have impacted on the participant behaviours. It is difficult to examine the behaviours without acknowledging the impact of the socio-cultural experiences on the nature of the interactions between the educators and the families. A key question the study seeks to explore is the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators were influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants. This chapter extends on the previous chapter by providing a critical discussion that centres on the influence of the socio-cultural experiences of the participants on creating their perceptions of the nature of the interactions, and why this is important for the early childhood field.

While the three planes presented by Rogoff influence learning from different foci, they also cannot be separated out as being of unique influence. The intertwining of the three planes informs the individual learning, and the influence of each plane is determined by the influence of the others. To better visualise this thinking, Figure 10 provides an image to demonstrate the way I, as researcher, have contextualised the interconnection of these three interconnecting fields of influence, with learning and knowledge being placed in the centre of the intersecting circles.

### Rogoff's lenses as influencing learning



Source: adapted from Rogoff

### Figure 13 Rogoff's planes as influencing learning

While the combined influence of the three intersecting planes create the individual's constructed knowledge, this chapter begins by examining the influences on the nature of the interactions between educators and families, by first discussing each of the planes separately. Starting from a broad community perspective and moving inwards to the more individual perceptions and influences of lived experiences, the planes provide a focus for discussing how the socio-cultural experiences have influenced the nature of the interactions as they reflect a model of partnership.

## 11.1 Looking through the lens of the community plane

When looking through the lens of the community/institutional plane, it becomes apparent that there have been two driving factors that have significantly influenced the nature of the interactions between the educators and the families. The current policy framework guiding the practice of early childhood educators has been a significant influencing factor in the way the educators have seen their role in interacting with families, but has also influenced some of the parents themselves in how they have created their own expectations of the interactions. Interactions with families are significant elements of the national quality framework, and being selected as a trial site

for the piloting of the framework was significant in guiding the way the educators reflected on their practice, because the language they used was reflective of the language of the framework.

The notion of apprenticeship as being a process in which the learner builds skills and knowledge by interacting within groups involving both peers and experts underpins Rogoff's community plane. Apprenticeship, as discussed by Rogoff, had been a strong influence on the practice of the educators. The centre as a trial site drew together a centre-wide approach to working with families, guided by the then centre manager, who used her expertise to influence the practice and create a centre-wide approach. However, one key aspect of this study is to examine the extent to which the interactions can be defined as FCP, and here, the community plane, and that of apprenticeship, plays a significant role in understanding the practice of the educators.

The policy documentation available at the time of the study for use by educators to guide their understanding and practice was limited in how it presented the model of FCP to the sector. When introduced to the sector, the VEYLDF provided minimal information as to how the policy defined and outlined FCP, dedicating only one paragraph in the policy document to explaining this model. As such, it was open to interpretation by those in the position of influencing practice to make meaning from this scant information in guiding the practice of their educators.

The report commissioned by the then government department on the validation of the trial identified that it was:

clear that the VEYLDF conceptualises Collaborative Practice<sup>15</sup> as a partnership between services and families to support parents' role in learning and development (Goodrick & Emmerson, 2009).

This in itself provides an insight into how centres were interpreting the model of FCP – and in some ways validates the practice of the educators, who, in many ways, saw their role as supporting parents to build their capacity as parents. The practice of the educators in the current study appeared to very much model the notion that they were there as ‘more knowledgeable experts’ and as such, had a role in guiding and building the capacity of the families in the learning and development of their child. There was a strong sense that they had the expertise to inform parents of what they needed to do to support the best interests of the child, and did not seem to recognise that the parents came to the relationship with any level of expertise on their child to actively share in the decision making.

The model of FCP in which parents are empowered to be shared decision makers in their child's learning and development has not been emphasised as a focus of the intended practice in the way the centres interpreted the Victorian Framework. In fact, the term ‘partnership’ has not been used at all in the document in conjunction with families and expectations of the educators. Phrases such as ‘working with families’ (p. 6) and ‘actively engage families’ (p. 10) guide the practice of educators in implementing FCP as a model of partnership (DEECD, 2009). Only once is the term ‘shared decision making’ used when the document identifies that ‘educators use families’ understanding of their children to support shared decision making about each

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<sup>15</sup> In the VEYLDF FCP sits under a collective heading of collaborative practice, which also includes partnerships with professionals and high expectations of every child.

child's learning and development' (p. 10), but is not mentioned again, nor expanded on to build the capacity of educator practice. In contrast, the terms used in the national early years framework, which was introduced concurrent with the Victorian Framework, includes much more explicit reference to partnership with families which permeates throughout the document (DEEWR, 2009).

If, as Rogoff's community plane suggests, the model of apprenticeship influences the learning and development of the individual, then the practice of the educators has been heavily influenced by the role of the centre director. There is a strong connection between the educators and their admiration and acknowledgement of the previous centre manager as a strong leader who had shaped the way they enacted their interactions with families. It was her guidance at the time of the trial of the VEYLDF that influenced the way the centre approached implementing FCP. There was a strong sense in the documentation around the centre of the need to engage with families regarding the learning and development of the children. Learning outcomes and how the centre was building these were displayed across the foyer when families entered the building. Wall displays of the current program foci were also set up outside each of the rooms highlighting the activity of the room, and information on child development was available on display in each of the rooms targeting the age and development of the children in that room. The approach and guidance taken by the centre manager in building the practice of the educators very much reflected the notion of the terminology of the Victorian Framework: both 'working with families' and 'engaging with families', but did not provide an expert-apprentice approach to understanding the underpinning principles of FCP. This level of understanding may have been absent



from the expertise of this centre manager, who was relying her own 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992) in the way she guided and built the capacity of the educators to engage in FCP.

The influence of the previous centre manager as the expert guiding the practice of the educators across the centre was also acknowledged by the parents, who, in nearly all their conversations, related their experience of their relationship with the centre concerning those interactions with the then centre managers. When speaking about the partnership they had with the educators, nearly all the conversations focused on the centre as a whole, and more particularly, the managers at the time. Only Vivienne named the individual educators she felt she a connection with. Both Vivienne and Alison saw the departure of these managers as having an impact on the way the centre continued to connect with families, and the influence this also had on the practice of the remaining educators. Looking more broadly at the institutional plane, Vivienne blamed the external cluster managers as creating an environment in which she felt she no longer had a partnership with the centre, and saw the changes as impacting on the interactions between her and the remaining educators.

The artefacts (the parent notices, newsletters, displays) produced across the centre to engage with families also reflect this institutional plane. Each of the artefacts presented a message to parents that they were valued and respected, that they were considered important in the daily life of their child's involvement in the centre, and that the educators were able to support families understanding of their child through sharing their expert knowledge on child development and learning. The way these artefacts were produced and presented very much represented the way the centre at an

organisational level had interpreted the intent of the policy direction within the framework documents. These artefacts were produced to inform families, and to be a catalyst for initiating dialogue by families with educators about the program, the centre happenings and children's learning. While each child had a personal learning portfolio, suggesting interpersonal interactions on a personal level between educator and parent, the way these portfolios had been created reflected an institutional approach, guided by the collective organisational interpretation of this form of assessment.

## **11.2 Looking through the lens of the interpersonal plane**

The interpersonal plane provides an interesting lens through which to examine the influence of connections that formed between educators and parents, and how these dyadic relationships may have contributed to how the nature of the interactions were interpreted. Here, Rogoff's notion of guided participation can be applied to this lens. Guided participation focuses on a system of interpersonal engagements and arrangements – the face-to-face and the more distal relationships – but more importantly, how these interpersonal engagements and arrangements create understanding. From the perspective of the educators, the relationships they formed were heavily influenced by their interactive experiences with individual parents. The incidental learning about the nature of the interactions came from casual comments, actions and observed behaviours by individual parents, and this impacted on how they thought about the nature of the relationships. Each of the educators spoke about families with whom they had a stronger connection, and these families they saw as the ones with whom they had a strong or effective partnership. Others were seen as more distant or disengaged, and not wanting a partnership. Susie went so far as to say that

some parents she saw as scary! An interpretivist framework enables each individual to interpret the world as they construct their own understanding, and in this study, the understanding that the individual educator, as created from their interpretive analysis of the interpersonal interactions, had formed their understanding of the nature of these interactions, which have been analysed within a personal construct of partnership.

Throughout the study, the personal interpretation of the effectiveness of the interactions, the way the concept of partnership has been constructed and the willingness of the individual to form a view on whether the interactions reflected a partnership were very much shaped by the interpersonal interactions with individual parents and families. Each of the educators could provide examples of parents with whom they had formed effective partnerships, and in each of these instances, this knowledge was gained by the way the parents acknowledged them as educators, as having expertise. This was particularly so when individual parents were deemed to be disinterested, or absent. This perception reinforced an interpretation that these parents did not want or seek a partnership, because the interpersonal interactions differed from those of the more 'connected' parents. The way the parents discussed the interactions as being partnerships was heavily influenced by interpersonal interactions with specific educators, who, they felt, provided them with recognition, with whom they had developed a sense of trust and in whom they had shared close, personal confidences. These interpersonal interactions were drawn on as indicative of their interpretation of a partnership. Through their own analysis of the responses each individual created their interpretation of what a partnership in ECE&C should look like.

Here, however, the influence of the three intersecting planes in creating the individual's constructed knowledge needs to be considered collectively, rather than separating them into three separate planes. The community plane influenced the way the notion of partnership and FCP was understood and informed the individual educator's or parent's interpretation of the interpersonal interactions. The view of each of the educators of the interpersonal relationships as being (or not) a partnership was informed by the organisational and policy-driven notion of how the interactions should look. This is an example of the 'master' guiding the 'apprentices' in building their personal capacity in understanding partnerships at an organisational level. With this constructed understanding, the individual has reflected on the nature of the interactions as seen through an interpersonal plane, using their personal interpretation of the interactions within their broader constructed understanding of what they believed a partnership looked like and consisted of.

### **11.3 Looking through the lens of the personal plane**

The personal plane, the 'participatory appropriation', is most influential in shaping the nature of the interactions, because 'through participation people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent activities' (Rogoff, 1995, p. 150).

While the act of participation is the catalyst for acquiring knowledge and skills, it relies on the extent to which these new knowledge and skills inform subsequent practice, as being shaped by learning from the previous experiences. This personal plane creates the interpretation each participant forms, which is a reflective culmination of the institutional and interpersonal planes intersecting with the individual's lived experiences and 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzales et al., 2005). Gonzales et al. base their

notion of funds of knowledge on a simple premise: that ‘people are competent; they have knowledge and their life experiences have given them that’ (p. ix). Looking at this acquired knowledge through the lens of the personal participatory appropriation plane, by drawing on the lived experiences, each of the participants have created their own personal interpretation and understanding of the nature of the relationships that are present.

The snapshot portraits of the individual participants present ten unique individuals with different life experiences, from different cultural backgrounds and of different ages, all of whom drew on these unique experiences to create the understanding that they each bring to the relationship. The diversity of these experiences, and the capacity to use and reflect on these experiences, created the lens through which each of these individuals interpreted the nature of the interactions as they believed them to be. Each participant drew on their life experiences in how they interpreted and discussed the nature of the interactions. Kylie was clearly able to see how her experiences during her own formative teenage years enabled her to see families, and the relationship she had with families in a certain light. She also saw these experiences as shaping the person she was today – one who was confident in herself as a person, and also her role as an educator of young children. She drew on this high level of self-efficacy to explain the interactions the way she did, because by her own admission, the emotional experiences she faced as a teenager influenced the way she interacted with families. This was in direct contrast to Susie, who did not share the same connections between her own experiences and how these influenced her understanding of the way she interacted with families. Her portrait shows a young woman who lacked self-confidence and self-

belief, and who was 'scared' of some of the parents, presenting as disempowered in her relationships with many of the families with whom she engaged. Empowerment in educators has been linked to feelings of self-efficacy and a sense of professional status (Rouse, 2012b), and for Susie, the funds of knowledge she drew on were not effective to build the understanding of the interactions as trusting and respectful.

Drawing on these life experiences and funds of knowledge also played a significant role in the way Rosa and Connie interpreted the nature of the interactions. Both these women reflected on their own lives, and the opportunities their experiences presented, as strongly influencing the way they saw the nature of the interactions they had with families. Like Kylie, these women presented with a high level of self-efficacy, sharing and reflecting on their lives as important in interpreting the interpersonal interactions with families, turning negatives into positives in the way they presented situations in the interviews.

The personal plane also provides a lens through which to gain an insight into the way the personal experiences of the parents guided their own interpretation of the interactions. Each of these parents had their own lived experiences, not only as a parent in the centre, but as an understanding based on past experiences and cultural practices that shaped the way they perceived the nature of the relationships with the educators in the centre. For Sarah, drawing on her understanding of how educators should interact with parents as a result of her own experience as an educator created the personal plane through which she interpreted the interactions as she understood them. For the other parents the sense of respect, validation and empathy that they felt towards the educators arising from their personal interpretation of the way these educators responded to each

of them in times of emotional crises in their lives created a sense of warmth towards these educators.

Each of the parent participants reflected on the way their own experiences and funds of knowledge were key factors in how they perceived the nature of the interactions with the educators. Each of them viewed the educators as the more experienced other, providing them with knowledge and awareness that filled in the gaps in their own constructed understanding. This perception created their interpretation of the interactions as being a partnership, because each felt they were key participants in the decision making processes, and individually they were respected in their role as parent. However, they did not see themselves as necessarily having expertise in this role. This deferral to those with greater expertise had, in a way, validated their own self-perception, because those who they deemed to have expert understanding validated this notion through their responses to suggested contributions, as with Vivienne and the literacy and Alison with the toileting.

#### **11.4 The interconnection of the lenses for the construction of knowledge**

Constructivism provides a frame through which to examine the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. When viewing the constructed understanding of the individual participants through the lenses of Rogoff's three planes, how these three planes all interconnect to form the view of the world is made clear, with the constructed reality of the individuals shaping the way they interpret the nature of the interactions.

Each of the different planes cannot be viewed independently from the influence each has on the way the individual builds their constructed understanding. The point of

intersection is the constructed knowledge of each individual. It was not only the way the educators interpreted the interpersonal interactions they experienced with the families, but the way these were interpreted and shaped by the institutional plane as ‘apprentices’ to the ‘master’ that constructed their understanding of the nature of the interactions. Following the lead of the coordinators created an organisational interpretation in how the centre mediated their understanding of what a partnership with families should look and feel like. When the centre took on a role as a trial site for the VEYLDF, it relied on the then centre director, who led the organisation through the process, to shape the way the educators took on board the notion of FCP. This learning as an ‘apprentice’ then influenced how the educators interpreted the interactions with families, delineating between those who were seen as being in a partnership, and those who were seen as not wanting a partnership. However, viewing this expertise through each of Rogoff’s planes, this manager relied on her own funds of knowledge and understanding of FCP in the way she built understanding across her team. She used her own personal plane to interpret the implementation of FCP because she had not been able to draw on an institutional plane as building her understanding. The educators interpreted her guidance through their own personal lenses, and used their existing understanding of FCP, while consolidating their understanding through the interpersonal interactions with one another.

Examining the way the educators individually interpreted the nature of the interactions with the families, the individual lived experiences, the participatory appropriation that they drew on, also influenced how they interpreted the interpersonal interactions between themselves and the families. Parents who were seen as rude or bullies, or as



not following the advice of the educators, were deemed so as a result of the constructed personal reality of the individual educators. What was interpreted by one educator as a parent being demanding, was to another viewed as someone who just needed time to form a trusting bond. While it could be argued that these reflections of the interactions are based on an interpersonal understanding, each of the educators had a unique perspective through which they were interpreting their experiences, creating a personal view of the relationship.

Each family constructed a notion of the nature of the interactions – again, an intersection of the three planes created their understanding. Each parent had their own individual story and lived experience that they drew on to interpret and analyse the interpersonal interactions they had with the educators. Each positioned themselves in the role of being a ‘help seeker’ (Davis et al., 2002; Dunst, 2010; Nachshen, 2004), seeking support and validation from the educators in the role as parent, but not acknowledging their own expertise in this. From an institutional plane, their own perceived expertise was built by the way they felt the educators had given them new understanding about their child, and built their parenting capacity. In some respects, each echoed Vivienne’s comment as ‘crediting them in raising her kids’ and guiding her in being a parent.

This chapter provides an insight into the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and educators was influenced by the experiences, beliefs, and understandings created by each of the individuals as a result of their unique socio-cultural experiences. The next chapter concludes the study by returning to the beginning of the journey, and discussing the study in the context of the purpose and

aims of the research, positioning the study in the context of the time and policy environment prevalent in the sector, and summarising the findings.

## Chapter 12 Conclusion

This study sets out to explore the nature of the interactions between parents and educators in an ECE&C setting to provide an understanding of the extent to which these interactions may be defined as FCP, and to reflect on these interactions as occurring within a model of partnership devised by the researcher. The study contextualises partnership within a theoretical construct of partnership framed by mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making. The study was undertaken in a time of considerable change for the ECE&C sector in Victoria. The recent introduction of the VEYLDF in 2010 had created a change for educators in understanding how children and families were viewed and this impacted on the practice of educators across the sector. At a national level The national quality agenda created a context where the professionalism of educators was at the forefront of quality service provision, through increasing qualifications, creating the nomenclature ‘educator’ to replace the less professional term ‘child care worker’ and improving praxis through the development of a framework that identifies principles that underpin practice and learning outcomes for children. relationships with families enacted within a model of FCP were positioned in the VEYLDF as critical for ensuring that the learning and development of children was effectively supported. While the national framework specifically uses the term ‘partnership’ when outlining the practice of educators in the relationships they form with families, this term in regards working with families is not used in the VEYLDF, which sites relationships with families in a broad area of ‘collaborative’ relationships.

This study was undertaken in the midst of these cascading reforms. The two frameworks had both been launched within months of each other, and little opportunity had been provided to support the educators to build their understanding of the intent of these frameworks. Even less professional development had been provided to assist educators to understand the how these two frameworks interconnected. While there were obvious similarities and synergies between the two documents, there were distinct differences. While the concept of partnerships with families is key to the national framework, this term is noticeably absent in the Victorian one. Fundamental in shaping this study was that in Victoria FCP – rather than family partnerships – was explicitly stated as one of eight practice principles for all educators in the sector. Because educators in Victoria are expected to navigate their practice across both the national EYLF and the VEYLDF, this study sought to investigate how FCP fitted within a broader context of partnership to provide guidance for the field in reconciling practice across these two frameworks.

FCP is a model of partnership largely unfamiliar to the broader ECE&C sector. While there had been much rhetoric about engaging with families through FCP at the time of the study, little training or professional development had been made available to educators working within non-interventionist settings, and the model had not been trialled to gain insight into how it might work in this broader sector. The study enabled an exploration of how the sector understood FCP as partnership practice, through an investigation into how one ECE&C setting approached the implementation of this approach.

This study sought to explore the following question:

How effective is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships between them, as determined by a partnership framework of mutuality, trust and reciprocity?

In examining this question, the following more specific questions were used to inform the findings:

To what extent can the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators be defined as family-centred practice?

To what extent is the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants?

## **12.1 Summarising the findings**

This study presents some key findings of significance to the field. When viewed within a broader theoretical concept of partnership, FCP clearly creates a context for engaging and interacting with families. The model recognises that families are pivotal in the lives of their children and should be empowered to engage in shared decision making as this relates to their children. FCP positions this within a set of core principles that recognise all families as having strengths and see them as equal partners in the decision making and goal setting for their children. Families are empowered as decision makers by having access to unbiased and complete information, enabling them to make informed choices, because educators listen to and acknowledge their role by recognising the expertise and knowledge of their children that families possess. These relationships and interactions will be culturally sensitive, recognising the individual and systemic influences that families bring to the relationship.

The nature of the interactions between the educators and families in the study site in many respects implemented the model as it sits within a broader partnership framework. The interactions can be described as trusting, mutual and reciprocal, in that both the educators and the families believed these characteristics underpinned the relationships. When revisiting the model outlining FCP, the educators certainly acknowledged, valued and respected the pivotal role that families played in the lives of their children and demonstrated cultural sensitivity in their interactions with parents. The interactions were inclusive, in that all families are made to feel welcome, accepted and valued. Only by delving more deeply into this model does the extent to which the nature of these interactions be defined as FCP becomes questionable. Missing from the interactions were several key characteristics that are fundamental to family-centred practice. Key to the model is empowerment of parents as key decision makers in relation to their children. The model outlines that for interactions to be identified as FCP, it is not only the relational behaviours such as trust, empathy and cultural responsiveness that need to be present, but the participatory behaviour of educators actively engaging parents in the decision making process. While the educators in this study sought and engaged families in information sharing, discussed their program and children's learning and development with families and sought to work with families on key developmental and learning approaches, this was largely driven by the educators, who very much saw themselves, and were seen by families, as experts.

A core principle underpinning FCP is a recognition that children exist within a broad system that includes families, communities and society, and that what affects one area of this system impacts on the interconnecting parts of the system. The findings from

this study have shown that for this site, viewing families in this broader systems approach did not always happen. While respect for the individualised structure of the family was clearly evident, as was a recognition and empathy of the stress and emotional needs of parents in times of difficulties and crises, when it came to the participatory practice of acknowledging and acting on the decisions parents were making at this time, the parents' decision choices were not always supported.

FCP looks at families as possessing strengths – the strength of knowing their child, of knowing what is important for that child – and in decision making in relation to their child, within their own broad family system and family ecology. The participatory behaviours enacted by the educators in this study present a contrary view of families. Rather than seeing them as possessing strengths, the educators viewed the parents as needing the expertise that they held in relation to the decision making for their child. This view was perpetuated by the parents, who looked to the educators as the experts. Even though at times they felt ambivalent regarding decisions being made, they deferred to the expertise of the educators, trusting they knew what was best.

The socio-cultural theory of learning provides the study an interesting perspective from which to analyse how effectively the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in developing genuine partnerships was. Rogoff's three planes of analysis create a context for examining the extent to which the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators is influenced by the socio-cultural experiences of the participants. It is clear from the study that the nature of the interactions and the extent they have been described as a partnership are heavily influenced by the past experiences, culture and beliefs of the participants. Engaging in

relationships with families within the model of FCP became a conscious practice as a consequence of government policy. While it can be argued that these educators fundamentally respected and valued families as pivotal in the lives of their children prior to the engaging with the framework, the interpretation of what was understood as FCP was largely shaped by the experience and understanding of the centre manager, who guided the ‘institutional’ approach to engaging in this practice. How the educators then interpreted their own understanding and developed their own practice was in turn influenced by the interactions they had with individual families, who shaped the way they interpreted the relationships, but was also influenced by the life experience and beliefs they held.

## **12.2 Significance to the field**

The findings of this study are of significance to the ECE&C sector. This is a sector still grappling with implementing broad policy and practice changes and trying to mediate their practice within two complementary yet competing framework documents. While these two policy documents were written to sit alongside each other, the language used within the VEYLDF presents different nuances for educators to mediate practice within. FCP is positioned within a broader framework of partnership, but the language of the VEYLDF does not in itself speak of partnership when discussing the relationship that educators have with families. This study creates a model that speaks to educator practice, creating congruence between the two documents and creating a lens through which educator practice can be examined and understood.

The model developed through this study positions the relationships created by educators with families to sit across both the EYLF and the VEYLDF. FCP has been



nested within the broader partnership framework, and as such provides a clarity for educators that was missing at the time these two frameworks were presented to the field. It provides a context for moving forward, enabling educators to analyse and reflect on their interactions as effective in implementing FCP, and as such form genuine partnerships with families.

Until now there has been limited understanding within the mainstream ECE&C sector as to what FCP looks like, how it can be defined as a partnership and how it can be measured and analysed. The literature has shown confusion across the sector as to what constitutes a genuine partnership, because research has shown that across the sector practitioners struggle with interpreting a partnership within the context of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and shared decision making. Determining where FCP sits within this broader partnership context has been more problematic for a sector of educators for whom this approach is new and until now has not been fully analysed or explained.

This study develops and outlines a model that presents FCP by examining the underpinning philosophy, the core principles and key characteristics that are essential to understand if one is to truly examine practice as sitting within this model.

Positioning FCP as a model that sits within a broader partnership framework enables educators, and those who lead and develop educator practice, to reflect on, critique and examine their practice in detail. This model provides a framework through which to understand and reflect on what is really occurring, and to identify limitations and areas where practice can be challenged. The findings from the study also provide those responsible for designing and developing professional development strategies for the sector with a clear direction on how to support educators to develop skills and

understanding of FCP. The model provides a detailed outline of the components to include in professional training, whether this be for educators already in the field, or for institutions in the pre-service training of future educators. The findings can be used as a starting point for other services and settings to examine and analyse their own practice as it might reflect those of the educators in this study.

### **12.3 Limitations of the study**

The decision to undertake the research study using a case study approach was both a strength and a limitation. The case study enabled the research to achieve rich description and depth, rather than coverage, for presenting the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. In the context of this study, the case site was purposefully chosen due to its involvement as a trial site for the validation of the VEYLDF. The site was typical of the broad early childhood long day care sector. The educators were representative of the ECE&C workforce, in that they came from diverse educational, demographic and cultural backgrounds. The parent participants were also representative of families typically accessing long day care programs in Melbourne's outer fringe suburbs. The typicality of the site enabled the researcher to draw inferences from the findings, which will provide insight for the field from which to learn. The findings reflect the practice and perceptions of a typical setting, and the broader ECE&C sector will be able to reflect on these findings and relate them to their own context.

Paradoxically, while the case site was typical of the ECE&C sector, it is also a unique entity, leading to obvious limitations in drawing broad conclusions regarding the applicability of the findings across the broader sector. The study sought to investigate

the nature of the interactions between the families and the educators to determine the extent to which these reflected FCP. While the findings demonstrate the extent to which this is true of this setting, it cannot provide a definitive analysis of practice more broadly across the sector. The limited number of educators and parents participating in the study, despite their typicality, affects the transferability of the findings. While typical of the broad population in respect to demography, cultural background and family dynamics, the participants in this small-scale study did represent only a subset of the total population.

All the participants in the study were female, and as such, it could be argued that the perspectives presented by the participants may be limited, because there were no male perspectives from which to provide a more rounded view of what might be classed as typicality. While initially a random sampling of parents participating in the service was sought, only four parents chose to participate. Each of these parents had their own unique reasons for choosing to participate, and so it could be argued that their opinions may be biased, and not representative of the broad parent population in the centre.

While all parents and guardians were invited to participate, there were no fathers involved in the study. Because each of the parent participants was the mother of the child, they have a relationship based on a gender and role that may be different from that of the fathers of the children. While the interviews of the participants provided rich description and depth, it was still a perspective that was unique to the individual, guided by the lens of their own personal plane.

There were no male educators working in this setting, so to suggest that the perspectives presented by the educators mirror those of the broader ECE&C workforce

is inaccurate. Male educators make up only around five per cent of the ECE&C workforce (ABS, 2010), so while not a significant proportion of the sector, their views are still relevant, and it should not be assumed are reflective of those of their female colleagues.

The choice of a single site, while enabling the research to gain deep insight into the nature of the interactions within this particular setting, did not allow for comparative analysis to test the ‘typicality’ of the findings for the broader sector. This site was a centred-based long day care setting. The ECE&C sector across Australia comprises a range of both centre-based and home-based programs that provide a range of care and education options. Focusing on a single long day care setting in the outer suburbs of Melbourne did not allow for a broader comparison of the findings across the sector more broadly. Centre-based long day care programs fill a particular niche in the ECE&C sector because parents who typically access these services have work or study commitments. What they are seeking from this service, and hence from the educators, may be very different from families participating in other programs. The educator participants in this study had all only worked in long day care settings. Each of the educators held vocational education and training (VET) level qualifications at either diploma or certificate level, and none held formal teaching qualifications or qualifications in other aligned areas such as allied health, family studies or community development, which might be found across the broader ECE&C sector. The context-specific nature of the site is limiting if the findings are to be applied to the broader sector, because while the site represents the typicality of long day care, it is not typical of the entire field.

## **12.4 Moving forward: Impact for future inquiry**

The findings of the study provide a direction for moving forward in the future, providing an insight into FCP as positioned within partnership context, drawing together the two complementary, but distinct, policy frameworks. The work to date has been encouraging, because it provides a good insight into practice which should be further taken up by the wider ECE&C field to better understand their own practice within these two policy contexts. This insight has been missing within the sector. The study not only provides an insight into what is happening at the grassroots level, in the nature of the interactions between families and educators, but as a result of this study, a model for reflecting on practice has evolved which can be a lens through which to analyse and build capability across the sector.

Given the limited nature of the case site as representative of the wider ECE&C sector, there is a range of opportunities to replicate this study more broadly. The study presents a tool for examining and understanding practice across not only other long day care settings, but other components of the ECE&C service system. Future research now must involve comparative studies across several long day care settings, looking for variance factors such as qualifications, family demographics or geographical locations. Comparative studies between service types will provide greater analysis of practice and understanding, because this may draw in different practitioner experiences, background and engagement with the model. Future studies that examine practice as it may be influenced by gender or qualifications of educators can also be undertaken, because this may provide an insight into the influencing factors these variances may play on the nature of the interactions between parents and educators. Further studies will enhance

and complement the findings from this study and create an understanding of the broader sector approach.

## Glossary

ACECQA	Australian education and care quality authority. Responsible for qualifications for early childhood education and care and for overseeing the ratings and assessment process for the NQS.
COAG	Council of Australian Governments. The peak intergovernmental forum in Australia.
DEECD	Victorian government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DEEWR	Australian government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
ECE&C	Early childhood education and care. In the context of this study, ECE&C refers to all programs which provide care and education to children under the age of six years.
Early childhood	Children aged between birth and six years.
Early years	Children, and programs for children aged between birth and eight years, including the first three years of formal schooling.
EYLF	The Early Years Learning Framework. A national framework for guiding the practice of all early childhood educators.
FCP	Family-centred practice
NQF	National Quality framework for early childhood. Developed in response to the COAG agenda for early childhood.
NQS	National quality standards for early childhood education and care programs.
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
VCAA	Victorian curriculum and Assessment Authority. Responsible for overseeing the development of the VEYLDF and the VELS.
VELS	Victorian Essential Learning Standards. The school-based curriculum operating in all state schools in Victoria at the time of the study.
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. The state framework for guiding the practice of all professionals and programs across the early years of childhood.

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# Appendix A Publication arising from the thesis 1

*Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Volume 13 Number 1 2012 [www.wvwwords.co.uk/CIEC](http://www.wvwwords.co.uk/CIEC)*

## **Family-Centred Practice: empowerment, self-efficacy, and challenges for practitioners in early childhood education and care**

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**ABSTRACT** Family-centred practice has been included in the Victoria, Australia Early Years Learning and Development Framework as a key practice principle for professionals working across all early years programs in that state. While this model of partnership for engaging and collaborating with families has long been used in the early intervention sector, the efficacy of adopting this model more widely across the wider early childhood education and care sector has not been explored. This article presents a discussion on family-centred practice as a model for engaging with families in the care and education of their children. Through an analysis of the underlying philosophy and an examination of the core principles and characteristics, the article explores family-centred practice as it sits within a broader theory of partnership. This analysis identifies that while there are essential principles and characteristics that position the model within a partnership framework, it is the notion of empowerment, an underpinning philosophy guiding the model that adds another dimension to the way practitioners in early childhood education and care settings collaborate with families. In examining the broader early childhood context, the capacity of many early childhood practitioners to effectively implement empowering behaviours is challenged.

### **Introduction**

It has long been recognised that learning and developmental outcomes for young children are greatly enhanced when strong and effective partnerships are developed between professionals and families, and where the development of common goals and shared decision making are valued and accepted. A large number of research and discussion papers have been published over the last ten years that have explored the value of partnerships in education (Epstein, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2004; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Tayler, 2006; Duncan, 2007; Ashton et al, 2008; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009), and it is not the purpose of this article to extend the discussion. It is,

however, important to acknowledge the key influence of this literature in shaping the development of policy and curriculum frameworks for early childhood education and care across Australia, where the notion of partnerships is central.

The Australian government in 2009 was strongly influenced by this literature and committed to the development at a national level of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Development, 2009). The framework identifies five key principles underpinning practice for professionals in early childhood education and care settings: secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; partnerships with families; high expectations and equity; ongoing learning and reflective practice; and respect for diversity. 'Partnerships with families' is identified as occurring when genuine partnerships between parents and educators are developed and there is a joint understanding of each other's expectations and attitudes. In genuine partnerships each other's strengths and understandings are acknowledged and built upon (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Development, 2009, p. 12).

Within the EYLF, 'partnership' is described as a relationship where parents and educators value each other's contribution to and role in each child's life, and the knowledge that each has of the child. It is a relationship where there is mutual trust and shared decision making and where each person can communicate freely and respectfully with each other and share insights and perspectives about each child (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Development, 2009, p. 12). This description of the elements of partnership discussed in the framework as it relates to parents and teachers reflects a broader theory of partnership found in the literature. This broader theoretical lens defines partnership within a stance of collaboration, trust and reciprocity, mutually agreed-upon goals and shared planning and decision making (Davis et al, 2002; Keen, 2007; Kruger et al, 2009).

Concurrent with the development of the national framework, the Victorian government also developed a framework for the early childhood education sector across the state. While partnership as a principle is presented within the EYLF to frame practice for educators in early childhood education and care settings, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (0-8) (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) builds on this principle to make specific reference to a model of partnership identified as family-centred practice. It is this model of partnership that will drive the practice of all early childhood professionals in enacting collaborative engagements with families across the early years sector (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Development, 2009, pp. 9-10). As a model of partnership, family-centred practice has been implemented across early childhood intervention programs and special education programs in Victoria since the mid-1990s. It is, however, a new concept for early childhood educators outside interventionist settings with regard to thinking about their engagement and partnerships with families.

This article presents a discussion on family-centred practice as a model of partnership for engaging with families in the care and education of their children. If this model of partnership is to be adopted as best practice for all early childhood educators, then a clear understanding of the key principles and characteristics that separate family-centred

practice out from a broader theory of partnership is key to enabling educators to enact the model in their practice.

### **Historical Overview of the Model**

Family-centred practice as a model of partnership had its foundations in the United States with the movement away from a medical model of service provision for children with disabilities and complex medical needs which began in the late 1970s (Brewer et al, 1989). The movement led to a change in the focus of service provision for children with complex needs. Until then, services provision had been child centred and treatment focused, where individual practitioners focused on what they believed to be the most appropriate level of intervention for the child. The change in focus led to a more social model of service provision that became more family centred, and which identified and acknowledged the influence and context of the family in the life of a child with a disability (Patterson & Hovey, 2000). This shift in focus came about in the main as a response to legislation in the United States which outlined the crucial role of families in the care of children with a disability. This change in focus resulted in a move away from the institutionalised care of children with disabilities and complex medical needs into an approach that supported these children being cared for in the home (Law, 1998; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). The development of family-centred approaches to care and intervention led to service providers being legislated to develop individual plans with the families which outlined the care and education programs for the children (Allen & Petr, 1998; Craft-Rosenberg et al, 2006; Murray & Mandell, 2006).

Alongside the shift that was occurring in the medical and disability arenas, the emergence of family support programs in the social welfare sector and the Head Start initiative also recognised the significant role of families as central to the health and welfare of children. In the development of programs and resources for vulnerable families, an approach which viewed the family within a systemic context, recognising that the actions affecting any one member of the family affect all of the members of the family, was adopted. Similarly, family-centred approaches to care and intervention were also adopted by the mental health field in the United States as a practice principle for that sector (Johnson et al, 2003).

In Australia, the implementation of family-centred practice has been a core practice principle for early childhood intervention practitioners since the early 1990s, in a response to the research and literature advocating the benefits for both children and families of this practice approach (Bruder, 2000; Blue-Banning et al, 2004). Of most significance to the adoption of this model in Australia was the work in the late 1980s of Carl Dunst and colleagues (Dunst, 1985; Dunst et al, 1988), who presented a discussion on the rethinking of family intervention practice to view families within a 'social systems' perspective. This view of family intervention practice moved away from viewing the child as the sole focus of intervention to seeing the family as the unit for intervention (Dunst et al, 1988, p. 5). The approach outlined for practitioners a model that placed families in the centre of decisions made for their children with complex health and medical needs. This focus enabled the families to become empowered in this decision making.

## **Family-Centred Practice as a Model of Partnership**

As a model of partnership, family-centred practice has as its underlying philosophy the belief that families are pivotal in the lives of children and should be empowered to engage in decision making for them (Brown et al, 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Allen & Petr, 1998; Raghavendra et al, 2007). The model has its origins in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Dunst et al, 1988; Espe- Sherwindt, 2008), in that it recognises that children exist within a wider context of family, community and society where at every level the ecological system is interconnected (Law, 1998; Weiss et al, 2005; Wright et al, 2010). In this ecological system, the child, the family and the environment are inseparable (Holland & Kilpatrick, 2006) and what affects one member of the system impacts on the other members (Brown et al, 1993; Law, 1998; Keen, 2007). Each member of the system, and their relationships, are in turn influenced by the broader social, political and educational policies. It is this broader system (mesosystem) that shapes the perceptions, expectations and equality of the relationships that exist between the nested systems (Odem et al, 2004).

Sitting within this ecological systems theory, the family as the core unit of intervention is recognised in the context of the family operating as a system (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Patterson & Hovey, 2000; Raghavendra et al, 2007). Family systems theory defines the family as being a group of interconnected and inter-related individuals operating within a social system. This system 'is set apart from other social systems in that it is unique and shaped by its own particular structural features, [the] psychobiological characteristics of its individual members and its sociocultural position within a larger environment' (Broderick, 1993, p. 37). It is as a result of the interconnections and interrelationships that as a system each individual is impacted upon by the other members of this system, an important principle when engaging with families as decision makers.

Family-centred practice acknowledges the systemic nature of a family and that as a system, all families possess certain strengths. These strengths need to be acknowledged and form the basis of the partnership. Building on these strengths, families should be empowered in being an active and equal partner in the decision-making for their child (Brewer et al, 1989; Bruder, 2000). Sitting alongside family systems theory is this notion of empowerment. Within a social systems perspective, empowerment recognises that all families have a degree of competency, but that it is the social system that prevents this competence from being displayed (Dunst et al, 1988). Within a family's social system it is the degree to which the family is supported to display competency and recognised as being competent that empowers the families to be an active partner in the decision making. If the social system assumes that the family does not have the level of competency to problem solve and make appropriate decisions, then it is the wider system that will step in and prevent this family from displaying competence, as this competence, is not recognised. Rather than empowering the family, it instead disempowers the family from being an active and equal partner. The role of 'help-giving' becomes that of decision-making rather than empowering. Recognising that all families have strengths but will often need 'help' to enact and build on these strengths, empowerment focuses on the decision-making and problem-solving abilities of the 'help seeker' by enabling them to have access and control over their own needs (Davis et al, 2002).

The notion of the family being a ‘help seeker’ is an important concept when examining the model of family-centred practice, as it supports a view of the family as seeking help in solving problems and identifying and acquiring necessary supports and resources. As recently as 2010, Carl Dunst continues to describe the nature of the relationship between families and practitioners in family-centred practice terms, as that of ‘help seeker’ and ‘help giver’ (Dunst, 2010). The model of family-centred practice has been predicated on the notion that families need to be empowered by the practitioners to become actively involved in the decision making and resolution of problems and in concerns surrounding the services, needs and resources for them and their children. Empowerment enables the ‘help seeker’ to acquire the essential behaviours needed to interact effectively with others and reflects parents’ active agency and sense of control over themselves, their child, their family and their environment (Nachshen, 2004). Taken from the work of Dunst and others, the concept of empowering families has been a key facet of family-centred practice which led to the model being adopted as best practice in Australia’s early intervention services in the early 1990s.

The core principles of family-centred practice are enacted by relationships and interactions that are characterised as being culturally sensitive, inclusive and reciprocal, recognising and respecting one another’s knowledge and expertise, and allowing for informed family choice. There is a sharing of unbiased and complete information by practitioners, and parental involvement is meaningful, individualised, flexible, coordinated and responsive (Johnson, 2000; Hanna & Rodger, 2002; Blue-Banning et al, 2004; Craft-Rosenberg et al, 2006; Keyser, 2006; Epley et al, 2010; Wright et al, 2010).

These characteristics are inherent in the practice behaviours of the practitioners in the interactional relationships that are formed with families and also in the way families are enabled to participate in this partnership and decision-making process. Fundamental to family-centred practice is the distinction between the relational and participatory practice behaviours (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst et al, 2007; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). For family-centred practice to be effectively enacted, both participatory and relational behaviours will be present in the practice of the practitioner. Relational practices are those interpersonal behaviours that govern the interactions between the ‘help giver’ and the ‘help seeker’, behaviours such as empathy, active listening and being non-judgmental, and ‘the crafting of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships’ (Barrera & Corso, 2002). Participatory practices are presented as those practices that focus on the involvement of the help seeker – practices such as those which enable families to be actively involved in the decision-making process, and be provided with opportunities to discuss options. Participatory practices also include the family as active participants in meeting desired outcomes and strengthening existing competencies. The reciprocal nature of family-centred practice invites the participation of the families, enabling the learning practitioners to gain from the expertise held by the parents concerning the uniqueness of their child. It is the latter component, the participatory behaviour, that is seen as being essential in the enactment of family-centred practice, and that sets it apart from a wider construct of partnership (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

## **Discussion of the Model as it Applies to Non-interventionist Early Childhood Education and Care Practice**

Partnerships are identified as collaborative relationships, characterised by shared decision making and agreed goals, mutual respect, equality, dignity, trust and honesty (Johnson, 2000; Dunst, 2002; Blue-Banning et al, 2004; Craft-Rosenberg et al, 2006; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Madsen, 2009). When examining family-centred practice through this wider partnership lens, there are many synergies that support the model as being an effective model of partnership.

In analysing family-centred practice as an effective model of partnership between families and early childhood educators in non-interventionist settings, it is important to appreciate the interconnections that exist between the core principles, the characteristics and the practice behaviours. It is these interconnections that define the model and help develop a conceptual appreciation of it so as to provide a framework for shaping practice. In Figure 1 the interrelationships between the core principles, the characteristics and the practice behaviours, as viewed through a broader partnership lens, have been presented as a means of making apparent the interconnections that should exist when family-centred practice is enacted.

**A model of Family Centred Practice**

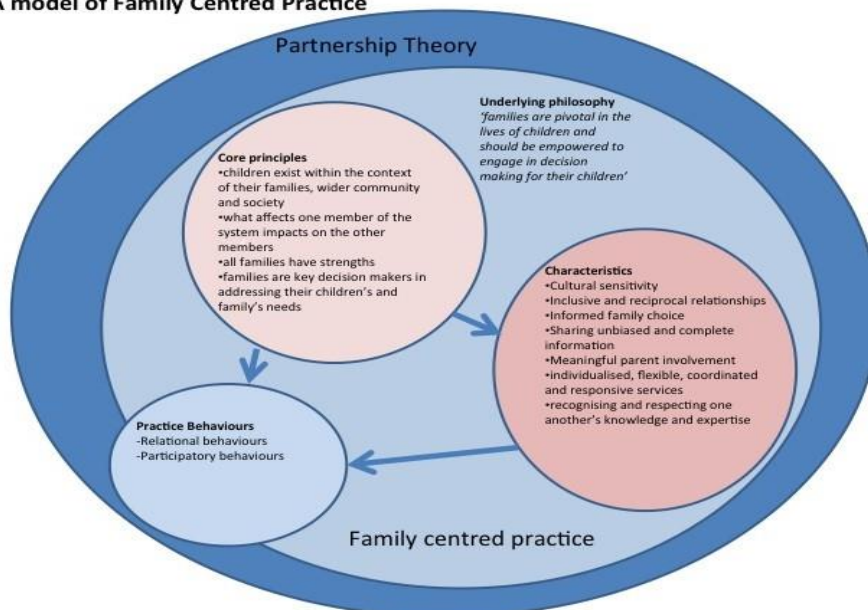


Figure 1. Conceptual model of family-centred practice as viewed through a partnership framework LENS.

The model is underpinned by the philosophy that families are pivotal in the lives of children and should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children, and this belief in turn guides the practice of the practitioners. In the model there is a clear connection between the core principles and the characteristics that guide the way the practitioners engage in their interactions and relationships with the families, and this connection in turn influences both the relational and the participatory practice behaviours. Family-centred practice as a concept cannot be enacted as a model of partnership if the underlying philosophy is neither acknowledged nor accepted. It is this belief in the role and power entrusted to the family that guides the core principles and that in turn is manifested in the characteristics that shape the practice behaviours. In order

that families are empowered as equal and respected partners in the decision making, practitioners must ensure not only that positive and affirming relationships are formed with families, but also that meaningful participation in all aspects of the decision making and problem solving is enabled.

As a model of partnership, family-centred practice must be viewed through a broader partnership lens. Looking through this lens, it can be seen that the underlying philosophy and core principles of the model mirror those of the broader framework. If the relationships that are formed between families and educators are truly driven by the belief that families are pivotal in the lives of children and therefore should be empowered to engage in decision making, then the relationships that are formed, and the interactions that occur, will reflect this partnership framework. Families will be recognised as having strengths and they will be seen as equal partners in the decision making and goal setting for their children; they will be informed through access to unbiased and complete information, and will be empowered by the decisions they have made. Families will be listened to and acknowledged in their role, and in their interactions with practitioners the expertise and knowledge of their children that families possess will be recognised. There will be cultural sensitivity in the relationships and interactions, with a recognition of the individual and systemic influences that families bring to the relationship.

Family-centred practice as a model has been predicated on the notion that families should be empowered in active decision making and resolution of problems and concerns surrounding the services, needs and resources for themselves and their children. It is the behaviour and practice of the practitioner that enables this sense of empowerment to develop. It is this aspect of the model that has a level of complexity when introduced to non-interventionist early childhood education and care programs. This notion of enabling families to become empowered to seek and access resources, actively participate in decision making and determine the services that best meet their needs is centred in the historic origins of family-centred practice. Having the locus of control in decision making positioned away from the family clearly disempowered families. The power for decision making traditionally sat with the health and medical practitioners, who were seen as the more knowledgeable experts. In non-interventionist early childhood education and care programs, however, the locus of control does not necessarily sit with a more knowledgeable expert. Most families are not usually identified as ‘help seekers’ in the same way as families with children who have complex medical and health needs are. These latter families are usually seeking services and resources from early intervention professionals. In non-interventionist early childhood settings, the families are consumers who are purchasing a service for their child.

It is acknowledged that families accessing early childhood care and education programs for their children will at times seek advice and direction from their children’s carers and educators. Families will often view the early childhood practitioner as an expert in child development and education theory. The relationship that prevails is not, however, predominately that of ‘help seeker’ and ‘help giver’. On the contrary, for most early childhood practitioners, the notion of them being an expert in their field is not a concept that governs practice and relationships. Family-centred practice is driven by the notion that families need to be empowered decision makers, and it is the role of the professional that is key to enabling this to manifest. The early childhood sector as determined by the

language of the framework developed in Victoria encompasses a wide field of services that include health, welfare, disability, education and care services. The sector exists within a system that is characterised by a diverse and complex system of professional roles from across a range of professional disciplines and qualification levels, as well as including a significant number of unqualified and untrained workers. In early childhood education and care programs, practitioners are all identified as early childhood educators and are engaged in a range of programs that are accepted by some sections of society as education, and by others as merely child minding (Elliot, 2007). Qualification levels of the educators range from those holding a degree-level qualification in early childhood education, who mostly work in funded preschool programs, to the room leaders and assistants who may have only completed basic certificate level training or a diploma qualification.

It is in the context of this complex service system that early childhood educators are given the role of professional expert when the model of family-centred practice is applied in the partnerships they develop with the families. But for many of these educators, particularly those working in the programs more traditionally identified as child care and child minding, they are grappling with their image being one of not having any real professional status at all. This is in contrast to the highly qualified and knowledgeable practitioners in the associated health, welfare and early childhood intervention arenas. These professionals have an established professional standing in our contemporary society, and reflect back to society an image of themselves as an expert. When examining the role of professionals in empowering families to actively participate as equal partners in decision making, it is important to acknowledge this distinction between the levels of professionals found across the broad early childhood service system. Families accessing more specialist early intervention services are working in close partnership with highly qualified specialists in seeking help and support for their child with significant health and development needs. In contrast, families accessing long day child care services are not seeking professional help and support necessarily, but are wanting to ensure that their child is receiving effective and responsive programs. It is here that the notion of empowerment becomes more complex.

Families mostly enter the early childhood education and care sector with an existing level of empowerment and self-efficacy and have different expectations of what they are seeking from that service. As such, these families develop different relationships with the practitioners in these services from those developed by families seeking help and support from experts in how best to care for a young child with developmental or health care needs. Coupled with these differing expectations is the level of skills and qualifications of the practitioners providing services for children in mainstream early childhood education and care programs. The sector comprises a largely female and traditionally low-paid and undervalued workforce (Moss, 2006; Bretherton, 2010), where educators feel that a low amount of professional recognition is awarded to them by the wider community. The sector is not dissimilar to that of a previous study of teachers who were also found also have a poor sense of professional prestige (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999). For much of the early childhood education and care workforce, there is a low sense of self-efficacy and a lack of a positive self-identity as being professionals (Osgood, 2006). Those in this sector do not see themselves as being enabled to provide expert advice for



families on child development and education theory. Research has shown a strong link exists between feelings of low self-efficacy and career choices by such women that involve more traditional job roles mostly associated with a female workforce, while women with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to choose careers in more professional roles (Hackett, 1995). As many of the families placing their children into early childhood education and care programs are working in more highly recognised professions than those of the practitioners providing the care, it could be argued that a power imbalance already exists. The underlying philosophy of family-centred practice may be more difficult to achieve as in fact the educators in this context feel themselves to be the disempowered partner in the relationship (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999). For early childhood educators to competently engage in behaviours that empower families to be active and equal partners in decision making, they need to be confident and have a strong sense of self-efficacy. These personal qualities are essential to support engagement in behaviours that enable families to become proactive and act as advocates for themselves and their children (Nachshen, 2004). This may prove a difficult goal for practitioners to achieve in the current professional climate of low-level qualifications and an undervalued workforce.

## **Conclusion**

Family-centred practice is a model for engaging and working with families that is founded on the principles and characteristics seen in a broader theoretical framework of partnership, such as mutuality, respect, reciprocity and shared decision making. While the model originally was introduced as best practice for the early childhood intervention sector, it is a model that has merit for wider application across the non-interventionist early childhood education and care sector. The underpinning philosophy and core principles that recognise the strengths and capacities of families within a broader ecological context that supports and empowers families in decision making are principles that should govern the practice of all early childhood educators and practitioners.

It is, however, by delving deeper into the underpinning principle whereby families should be empowered to engage in decision making for their children that the capacity of many early childhood practitioners to effectively implement empowering behaviours may be challenged. Family-centred practice is a model of partnership predicated on the notion of families seeking help and support in determining the best services for their child, particularly families that may feel vulnerable and disempowered by the service system. Families accessing non-interventionist early childhood education and care programs for their children, where there are no concerns about the child's health or development, are not necessarily seeking help and support from the educators and carers. In contrast, they are the purchasers of services, where they expect to receive quality programs that meet their children's learning and development needs. In a field where the workforce is made up largely of practitioners with low-level qualifications and a poor belief in their professional standing in the community, early childhood educators and carers need to be supported to develop skills to engage in empowering behaviours with the families in their services. While most early childhood education and care practitioners will acknowledge the underlying principle that families are pivotal in the lives of children, it is the capacity to engage in both relational and participatory practice behaviours that builds empowerment. It is the capacity to enact both relational and participatory practice

behaviours that reflects the core principles of family-centred practice and creates the challenges for many of those in the existing workforce in the non-interventionist early childhood education and care sector.

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# Appendix B Publication arising from the thesis

*Global Studies of Childhood Volume 2 Number 1 2012 www.worlds.co.uk/GSCH*

## **Partnerships in Early Childhood Education and Care: empowering parents or empowering practitioners**

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**ABSTRACT** Research acknowledges that outcomes for young children are enhanced when effective partnerships are developed between educators and families. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework provides direction for the professional practice of early childhood educators by acknowledging the importance of educators working in partnership with families. In the Victorian state-based early years framework, family-centred practice has been included as the practice model. Family-centred practice has as its core a philosophy of professionals supporting the empowerment of parents as active decision makers for their child. The early childhood education and care sector in Australia, however, is made up of a workforce which is largely perceived as being undervalued as a profession. This raises questions as to the capacity of these educators to support the empowerment of parents when they themselves are coming from a position of disempowerment due to their professional status. This article reports on findings from a small-scale study of childhood educators working in a long day-care setting which aimed to identify perceptions of the partnerships that exist between themselves and parents. In the course of the investigation, it became evident that some of educators felt disempowered in the relationships that exist with some families.

### **Introduction**

There has been considerable research undertaken over the past few years that has explored the value of partnerships between educators and families for improving outcomes in learning and development for children (Epstein, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2004; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Tayler, 2006; Duncan, 2007; Ashton et al, 2008; Jinnah & Walters, 2008; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). In Australia, this research has influenced the development of key practice principles for educators working across the early childhood education and care sector. The national framework that guides the practice of all early childhood educators (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) identifies partnerships with parents as one of the key principles underpinning practice for educators in early childhood education and care settings. At a more local

level, in the state of Victoria a framework has been developed to frame professional practice and create a common approach among all early childhood professionals working in Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). While the development of this more localised framework mirrored that of the national, the Victorian framework has included family-centred practice as its model of partnership for engaging and collaborating with families. While family-centred practice as a model focuses on supporting the empowerment of parents as key decision makers, this article argues that it is through empowered professionals that parents are assisted to become active and equal decision makers.

This article reports on findings from a small study of a group of childhood educators working in an urban long day-care setting. A key focus of the study was to identify how these educators reflected on their understanding of family-centred practice, and how they believed they were implementing this model in their work with families. Preliminary analysis of the interviews identified that while each of the participants felt they were implementing family-centred practice, the educators did not always feel empowered partners in the relationships they held with some families.

## **The Literature**

Partnerships have been identified as collaborative relationships, characterised by shared decision-making, mutual respect, equality, dignity, trust and honesty (Johnson, 2000; Dunst, 2002; Blue-Banning et al, 2004; Craft-Rosenberg et al, 2006; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Madsen, 2009; Alasuutari, 2010). Dunlap and Fox (2007, p. 277) describe partnerships as also entailing a clear and strong commitment by both parties and an understanding of each party's circumstances and roles. Trust has been identified as the characteristic most highly ranked by both families and professionals as being of most importance in a partnership, followed by mutual respect, open communication and honesty (Dunst, 1994, cited in Keen, 2007, p. 340). It is within this understanding that family-centred practice as a model of partnership is being positioned.

## **Family-Centred Practice**

Family-centred practice is a model of partnership that has been implemented across early childhood intervention programs in the state of Victoria since the mid 1990s. It is underpinned by the philosophy that families should be empowered decision makers for their children, in partnership with the professionals (Brown et al, 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Allen & Petr, 1998; Raghavendra et al, 2007). The key characteristics of family-centred practice reflect those of a broader partnership theory; however, it is the notion of professionals supporting families to be empowered which sets this model as distinct when examining it in a broader partnership context. Family-centred practice has its foundations in the movement away from a medical model of service provision for children with disabilities and complex medical needs which began in the USA in the late 1970s (Brewer et al, 1989). It is built on a concept that parents come to the relationship from a position of disempowerment, seeking help from the professionals to access services to assist them in caring for their child at home (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst, 2010). It was seen as a role of the professional working with the family to empower them as key partners in decision-making regarding care and



intervention for their child, and in identifying and accessing necessary services (Brown et al, 1993; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Allen & Petr, 1998; Raghavendra et al, 2007).

Professionals are usually highly qualified and experienced health or specialist practitioners and, in the context of family-centred practice, are described as ‘help-givers’, while the families are seen as ‘help-seekers’ (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Davis et al, 2002; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Dunst, 2010). In the context of a broader early childhood education and care sector, most families, however, are not seeking help from the professionals, but, in contrast, are often confident and in many cases well-informed consumers of services which are usually provided by educators with minimal levels of qualifications.

## **Empowerment**

Empowerment is central to family-centred practice. The term ‘empowerment’ is widely used across a range of human services disciplines as a desirable outcome of service practice (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997, p. 287). In the context of family-centred practice, empowerment can be seen as a process whereby individuals access knowledge, skills and resources that enable them to gain positive control and improve the quality of their lifestyle (Singh, 1995, p. 13). Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) discuss empowerment as an individual’s capacity for decision-making and problem-solving. Empowerment has also been defined as ‘the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours associated with perceptions of control, competence, and confidence’ (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 306). Thompson et al (1997) also present a view of empowerment as being a construct which involves individuals in determining their own future, and where individuals are confident they have the information and problem-solving skills necessary to deal with challenging situations. Thompson et al (1997, p. 100) see it as the role of professionals to assist parents to become empowered by sharing information and engaging them as partners in shared decision-making.

Dempsey and Foreman (1997) discuss empowerment from a psychological construct based on the work of Zimmerman (1990, 1995). This approach refers to empowerment at an individual rather than at an organisational or community level, and will usually include a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence and the ability to assertively take a role in controlling resources and decision-making (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman, 1995). The approach taken by Zimmerman proposes a number of components that need to be present when empowerment is evident. These include participation and collaboration, strong self-efficacy and a sense of control. Psychological empowerment is also seen as a concept by which people gain control over their lives (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570).

Empowerment as it applies to family-centred practice, however, centres on the notion that we all have existing strengths and capabilities, as well as the capacity to become more competent (Rappaport, 1981; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Boehm & Staples, 2004), but that while families possess some level of strength and competence, they still need help from the professionals to access resources and participate in decision-making (Dunst et al, 1988). This concept has created a context in which the professionals are viewed as the ‘help-givers’ and the parents as the ‘help-seekers’ (Davis et al, 2002; Nachshen, 2004; Dunst, 2010). It suggests a level of empowerment existing with the professionals, while

the parents are seen as needing to be supported to become empowered (Dunst et al, 1988). This concept of 'help-giver' and 'help-seeker' as discussed in this literature presents a context of inequality, with the professionals coming from a position of empowerment and the parents of relative disempowerment.

A further view of empowerment can be found when examining empowerment theory through a constructivist lens. Within this context, it has been argued that empowerment can mean different things to different people, as determined by their past experiences, across time and settings and the population that is targeted (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995; Foster-Fishman et al, 1998). Positioning empowerment within a constructivist framework provides an important platform from which to view empowerment as it sits within family-centred practice. The constructivist view identifies empowerment of the individual as being determined by the sociocultural and ecological context in which the individual exists and the experiences drawn upon that enable the individual to construct and enact empowering behaviours. It can be argued that, historically, the sociocultural and ecological context of family-centred practice created a relationship in which the professional comes from a position as the more skilled and knowledgeable expert in the partnership, and the family as disempowered, as they lacked the medical skills and knowledge to confidently support and care for their child with complex needs at home. As such, it was the professional's role to assist the family to become empowered decision makers. In following the constructivist approach, however, if the professional has constructed a view of themselves as being undervalued in their role and lacking professional recognition, it could be argued that they do not see themselves as coming from an empowered stance.

When examining empowerment in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia, it could be argued that this may reflect the beliefs of many educators. A body of literature exists that presents a view of educators feeling disempowered due to their own perceptions of their levels of control and decision-making, and their perceived status (Short, 1994; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Galen, 2005; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Zembylas & Papanastasiou,

2005; Overton, 2009). Davis and Wilson (2000, p. 349) discuss the relationship between empowerment and the levels to which an individual has a sense of personal power and motivation. Empowerment in teachers has been linked to feelings of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, supportive leadership and a sense of professional status (Short, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005, p. 451) found that teachers who were satisfied with their professional growth, opportunities for decision-making and status ended up with a high sense of empowerment. Quaglia et al (1991, p. 211) also found that satisfied and dissatisfied teachers differed on their sense of empowerment, with satisfied teachers presenting with higher levels of empowerment than dissatisfied teachers. Teacher satisfaction is associated with teacher pay, working conditions, levels of stress, professional status and perceived capacity to adequately undertake their role as teachers (Short, 1994; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005; Overton, 2009).

### **Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia**

In the context of the early childhood education and care workforce in Australia, these discussions on teacher empowerment are particularly pertinent. Since the early part of this century, there has been considerable discussion on the dichotomy between 'education' and 'care' with young children. In Victoria, the provision of 'education' is mostly perceived as being the realm of early childhood teachers holding a three- or four-year degree, who provide programs for children in the year prior to starting school, and 'care' is seen to be the main emphasis of services sought mainly by working parents to enable them to gain paid employment. These care services are mainly provided for by staff qualified at the two-year diploma level or those with certificate-level training. A significant number of the early childhood care workforce across Australia has no formal training at all (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). This context has led to an environment where there is a professional divide between what constitutes a 'proper' teacher in early childhood education and care settings (MacFarlane & Lewis, 2004) and those who are seen predominately as caregivers. The national policy agenda is that all early childhood centres will employ a degree-qualified teacher by 2014, but many long day-care centres in Victoria are still to meet this policy agenda and are mostly staffed by lesser-qualified educators. Since the implementation of a national reform agenda for early childhood across Australia, all practitioners involved in the care and education of young children are referred to as 'early childhood educators', regardless of the qualification they hold.

This background provides an important context for framing the discussion on empowerment as it is enacted within the early childhood and care sector across Australia, particularly as it relates to those educators working in roles more traditionally associated with care provision. Since the mid 1990s, childcare in Australia has largely been shaped by policy aimed at enhancing economic prosperity by supporting women to engage in paid employment. This policy saw a significant increase in 'for-profit' services to meet increased consumer demands for childcare places. Early childhood education and care now sits within an environment where parents are often seen as consumers and purchasers of a service (Goodfellow, 2007). These policy directions have resulted in a sector that is now characterised by low levels of qualified staff, poor pay and conditions, as well as 'poorly defined and fragmented notions of customer need, and weak professional advocacy' (Bretherton, 2010, p. 7), creating a climate in which childcare practitioners feel undervalued and in which there is a largely disempowered workforce (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011).

## **The Study**

Using a case study methodology (Yin, 2003), six early childhood educators working in a large early childhood education and care centre in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, participated in an individual interview lasting around an hour. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the relationships that the participants believed existed with the parents of the children in their care in order to examine the extent to which these relationships reflected the model of family-centred practice. The interviews were structured so as to gain insight into the educators' perceptions of the partnerships between themselves and the parents, and the extent to which the educators felt empowered to assist parents to be empowered partners.

The centre where the educators work provides programs for children aged between birth and six years, with most of the children attending either full-time or two to three days each week while their parents are working. The community where the centre is located is very diverse, with many families having English as a second language and where there are 18 different languages spoken by families across the centre. The educators working in the centre also reflect this diversity, with a number speaking the community languages of some families. Many of the educators also live in the local community. While one of the participants in the study had been at the centre for only three years, most of the educators have worked in the centre for at least five years. The educators have a range of qualification levels, ranging from certificate-level training in children's services to a two-year-diploma-level qualification. Although none of the staff had a teaching qualification, one educator was, at that time, studying to complete a Bachelor's degree.

The six participants were representative of this staff population, with three holding diploma-level qualifications and three certificate-level qualifications. Four participants spoke English as a second language. One of the diploma-qualified participants was in a position of leadership at the centre. A second diploma-qualified participant was employed as a room leader and, at the time of the study, was undertaking her Bachelor's degree studies part-time. All the participants were female and ranged in age from 22 years to 60. They had between 3 and 20 years' experience working as early childhood educators. Table i presents an outline of the individual participants, their qualifications and their role in the centre.

Participant	Qualification	Role	Parent	English as a second language	Years in Sector
1	Diploma	Centre leadership	No	No	5
2	Diploma – studying for a degree	Room leader	No	No	3
3	Diploma	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	5
4	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	7
5	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	9
6	Certificate	Room assistant	Yes	Yes	20

Table i. The participants' characteristics.

## The Findings

The interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions entered into the NVivo program for analysis. The responses from the participants were individually coded in order to identify the key themes that emerged. These themes focused on the participants' beliefs as to the nature of the partnerships that had been created with the families, and the factors that they felt influenced the way these partnerships functioned. As empowerment is a

core component of family-centred practice, the transcripts were coded in order to extrapolate references to empowerment and how this was discussed by the individual participants.

### **Effectiveness of Partnerships**

Each participant believed they had positive relationships with most of the families of the children using the service. When asked to describe the nature of the relationships they held, typical responses were: 'I think they [referring to families] would say we have a good one. We work hard towards building a relationship with our families' (Participant 5) and 'their [the child's] family is your family, you're living in a big family. So we have a very big family here' (Participant 4). While not mentioned explicitly, these responses indicate characteristics of partnerships found in the literature, such as respect and dignity shown towards families.

### **Influences on the Partnership**

There were a number of factors that the participants believed influenced the way these relationships had been built. Three of the educators, who were parents themselves, spoke of being a parent as a strong influence on the way they interact with parents, demonstrated through comments such as: 'Well, I'm a mother, and a nana, and live in the community' (Participant 6). Another participant responded that 'I think my personal life I think my own children' (Participant

5) was an influencing factor. A third participant commented that 'as a person I believe that I treat the children like my own children. So whatever is best for my children, I treat all the children in my care the same' (Participant 3), linking the way she cares for children to the way she cares for families.

While not being a parent herself, Participant 1 also discussed the experiences gained in her home life as influencing the way she interacts with families, discussing having to drop out of school at 16 to care for her mother and having to travel across town by public transport on weekends to gain her qualification as impacting on the way she deals with families: 'So I've had the experience of dealing with those difficult emotional situations, which influence the way I interact with families a lot. So a lot of my home life has influenced how I interact with families'.

Participant 4 attributed her experience as a parent to influencing the way she interacted with families. She defined herself as follows: 'I'm a family, I'm a parent, I'm a mother, so when I think about it, I want them to talk to me'. She also spoke of her past experiences as a young bride of 14 and of migrating to Australia as a teenager, as well as being a parent, as providing her with confidence for the role she takes with families.

Time was also seen as a factor that influenced the nature of the relationships. Those relationships with parents that had been able to develop over a number of years, as the educators cared for the older and then younger siblings in the same family, had created positive feelings of partnership. 'I've had a lot of time to get to know the families that I do have good relationships with and they've gotten to know me' (Participant 1) and 'they

were happy to see me there [in the child's room], because they know me for the three or four years I had their sons or their older daughters before' (Participant 4) are indicative of the responses of the participants.

Another key factor that appeared to influence the nature of the relationships was trust and respect. Comments such as 'there's a lot of effort that has to be put on to form a partnership, and you need the basis of any relationship, trust and respect' (Participant 1) and 'Yeah, it's the respect that you have for each other I think' (Participant 6) reflected a conscious action by these participants to build trust and respect with families. These statements were supported by later comments such as: 'I've formed those relationships now, so the main thing is to have those respectful relationships' (Participant 1) and 'We always try and gain their trust. Trust is very important' (Participant 6).

While these two educators spoke positively about the importance of respectful and trusting relationships as influencing the partnerships, this was not reflected in the interviews of all the participants. In contrast, not feeling respected was discussed as a key factor in relationships that other educators described as being less positive. A common theme coming from these interviews was a perception that some parents see the educator as 'just a babysitter' (Participant 5): 'Sometimes I feel they [parents] treat us as a babysitter' (Participant 2). Or parents think that: 'I'm paying for this so they [the children] have to be looked after' (Participant 4). Other comments further identified perceptions of being undervalued by parents – for example, 'This family, whatever I did, she didn't like me, you know. She used to wait for another staff member to come in, like she didn't trust leaving him with me' (Participant 3); 'when she comes to pick him up I was talking about the child's day and she wasn't even listening' (Participant 5); and 'I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time, they don't want to talk to you' (Participant 2). It became apparent from the responses that engaging with the educators in discussion about their child's day is a way that these educators feel they are respected and valued by parents.

When reflecting on the relationships that they did not describe as an effective partnership, some educators outlined situations where they felt their professional expertise and knowledge of early childhood development was not being recognised, typified by a statement such as: 'because I am younger, I get a lot of "You don't know, because you're young!"' (Participant 2). Participant 1 had also discussed feeling like this when she first started her career as an untrained 18-year-old:

When I started I actually had a lot of trouble, being that I was only just eighteen, so I did have a trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for the fact that I was eighteen.

She, however, went on to say that: 'it didn't take me long to get over it, and once families got to know me, it was irrelevant'. It is worth noting that this participant is the same age as Participant 2 and has the same level of qualification; however, it is Participant 1 who spoke originally about the influence of her previous life experiences as impacting on how she interacts with families. Participant 2 did not bring any of this self-reflection into the discussion. Participant 5 believed that some parents do not value her expertise in providing advice on child development and she saw this as impacting on the partnerships

she formed: 'she [a parent] asks for the advice ... and she does it with us for a little while, and she goes back and then we're back at square one' – although this was not found to be an issue in other responses.

All of the participants identified language barriers as an issue in forming effective partnerships with families where English was not their first language. Representative responses are:

I struggle to form relationships with them [families where English is a second language]. Because I can't talk to them I have to get one of my co-workers to translate any information. So it's hard to form a rapport with those families. (Participant 1)

Some families are different because they can't speak the language ... I treat them the same, I just have to go running around looking for someone that speaks the same language as them to interpret for me. (Participant 5)

Sometimes when I can't communicate to the families if they're, like, non-speaking English or something like that, I find it hard to communicate to them, so it's hard to form that connection with them as well. (Participant 2)

Across the centre, however, there was mostly a sense of connection with the families for whom English is not their first language and a perception of empowering the families by presenting children's work, assessments and achievements in the families' home language – for example, 'wherever possible we try and make sure staff in their language talks to them and explains to them, and we try and give them information in their language' (Participant 6) and, 'Last year I start doing learning journeys, and the books, in Turkish and in English, and I write Turkish and on the side it's English, what she's doing in Turkish and explain and I write in English too' (Participant 4).

## **Power and Empowerment**

When asked to reflect on their perceptions of whether they felt that there was shared power in the partnerships between themselves and the families, the participants' responses varied. With some of the participants, the responses reflected a belief that in some relationships which were perceived as less positive, the parents have more power. The following comments are indicative responses: 'a few families think they have power, they can do anything they want' (Participant 2); 'some parents, they think they've got more power, at the end of the day I think so, because it's their child' (Participant 5); '[some parents think] "I want the best for my child. If it's not, I can follow up, I can go and make them work better"' (Participant 3); and 'probably that they've got more power, because you sort of feel a little bit intimidated' (Participant 2). These comments reflect a level of disempowerment in these three educators, projecting a perception of not being respected or valued by these parents. Participant 2 also spoke about parents being angry and intimidating – 'another family, I feel the parents when they walk in, it's like they're angry, or you feel like you're wasting their time' – and projected a lack of confidence in knowing how to build relationships with these families.

However, not all the responses reflected these levels of disempowerment. Two of the participants, when asked the same questions, responded differently. Participant 1 believed that in the past, when she was younger and had just started working with children, she had felt disempowered in her relationships with some families:

I did have a trouble with getting families to trust me and respect me in educating their children, purely for the fact that I was eighteen. And it didn't make a difference that I could do what I was doing and was doing well.

However, now that she has worked to establish herself in her role, she speaks with more confidence: 'now, a lot's changed, I've formed those relationships now, so the main thing is to have those respectful relationships'. She spoke with pride of the way that, in just a few short years, she had built her own professional capacity from being an untrained room assistant five years ago to now being a member of the leadership team: 'It hasn't taken me long to go from co-worker down in the toddlers' room, to now I'm acting 2IC [assistant manager]'.

Participant 6 reflected that some parents may have different expectations and understanding of the childcare program, needing time to gain a shared understanding: 'it's a constant trying to persuade parents that children need to get dirty, need to get wet, need to play with sensory things. Some cultures don't understand the importance of play'. This participant saw it as her role to work with parents 'to get their confidence'. This same educator was able to communicate a sense of empathy towards families that previous participants had not demonstrated: 'I sometimes think they find it hard to leave their children, it's not really a personal thing, it's just getting that trust and feeling like they can leave their children every day, go to work' and 'Oh, now I know how difficult it is when nana comes in and there's a few tears because the grandchild's crying'. Throughout the interview, she not only spoke confidently about herself as an educator, but also presented as someone who had a strong understanding of the emotions that parents may be experiencing when leaving their child in care. While other participants spoke of being a parent as influencing how they related to families, it was only this participant who spoke about understanding the emotions parents were experiencing. She also perceived her own experiences living in the community as supporting her to build an understanding of how families may be feeling when leaving their children in care:

Well, I'm a mother, and a nana, and live in the community ... so when I work here I feel like I'm part of this community ... I feel all that experience has been invaluable and now in the toddlers' room ... we get a lot of broad spectrum of the community come here, which makes it very interesting to work. I love it.

## **Discussion**

Family-centred practice presents a model of partnership in which relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, but also where more expert professionals assist families to be empowered and respected decision makers. Being empowered has been described as having the attitudes, knowledge and behaviours associated with perceptions of control, competence and confidence (Thompson et al, 1997; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). While family-centred practice centres on professionals assisting parents to become empowered,



partnerships are mutual relationships, suggesting that educators also need to be empowered partners in the relationship. The findings from this study suggest that while some of the educators present with characteristics where they might be described as being empowered, others do not seem to possess the same perceptions of control and confidence in their relationships with some families.

Three of the participants (Participants 2, 3 and 5) spoke of families with whom they had found it difficult to form a positive relationship, and expressed feeling disempowerment in these relationships. The findings showed a perception by these educators that some families did not seem to have a professional recognition of their role as an educator, presenting a belief that some parents treat them as a babysitter and describing feeling intimidated when they try and engage with them, reinforcing the links between a sense of professional identity and professional status and levels of empowerment found in the literature (Short, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005), as these participants clearly perceived themselves as having low professional status and presented with lower levels of self-efficacy.

However, other participants responded in a much more reflective and empathetic way. Three of the educators (Participants 1, 4 and 6) discussed the need for families to have time to develop a shared partnership and to feel confident in trusting their child to the care of the educators. They were able to reflect an understanding of the parent perspective that had not been evident in the responses for the previous educators. The responses by these educators reflected relationships with families in which they presented as being empowered as equal and respected decision makers, in turn supporting families as empowered partners in the relationship. None of these participants expressed the feelings of disempowerment that had been evident with the previous group. Each of these participants had discussed past life experiences as being a strong influence on the development of their own personal capacity, which they saw as a key factor in the way they formed relationships with families. This was something that the previous group had not reflected on during their interviews.

Policy and societal context has placed the image of the early childhood educator in Australia as lacking in professional identity and status (Goodfellow, 2007; Bretherton, 2010; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011); however, in examining the differing perceptions of empowerment presented by the educators, merely drawing the connection to professional status and recognition does not in itself provide the reasons for feeling disempowered. All the participants belong to the same professional industry and work in the same service. While they held differing levels of qualifications and experience, this did not seem to be a factor in the comments they presented in the interviews. Only one of the participants who presented as empowered held a diploma-level qualification, while the other two were certificate-level assistants. On the other hand, of those presenting as less empowered, two were qualified to diploma level, one of whom spoke of feeling intimidated by some of the families.

It is necessary to look further into why some of the participants reflected greater levels of empowerment than their colleagues. As discussed in the literature review, a constructivist view presents individual levels of empowerment as being determined by the sociocultural and ecological context in which the individual exists, and the experiences drawn upon to

enable the individual to construct and enact empowering behaviours (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995; Foster-Fishman et al, 1998). The three participants who presented as being more empowered in their relationships and partnership with families were able to present a view of themselves as having a strong sense of self-efficacy. These individuals were able to reflect on and acknowledge their personal sociocultural and ecological context as influencing the way they create and respond to partnerships with families. Individually, they reflected on life experiences and challenges as influencing the person they are today, and how their life experiences have enabled them to build their personal self-efficacy, which in Zimmerman's (1990) view is a necessary component of empowerment. It was this personal and intuitive reflection of the influence of past experiences that was not evident in the interviews with the other participants. It appears that it is the level of self-efficacy rather than a societal view of professional identity and status which is of greater influence in building empowerment in the educators.

## **Conclusion**

This study, while only focusing on a small cohort of early childhood educators working in one long day-care centre in Melbourne, does present some interesting findings that are of significance when examining the capacity of the sector to empower families as partners in the care and education of their children. While empowerment is a central component of family-centred practice, not all early childhood educators are equally positioned to empower families or, in fact, even demonstrate empowerment in some of the relationships they have with the families of children in their care.

While links have been made in the literature between empowerment and professional identity, it could be assumed that, given the context of the Australian early childhood workforce, the profession as a group – particularly those who are mainly involved in the care of young children – would be largely disempowered. However, the findings from this small-scale study present a different view. While all the participants interviewed held similar qualifications and levels of experience and worked in the same centre, three of the participants were able to demonstrate higher levels of empowerment than their colleagues. These participants were all able to draw on past experiences as shaping the way they engaged with parents.

The findings support the constructivist view of empowerment as being influenced by the sociocultural and ecological experiences of the individual. Those educators who were able to reflect on the influence of life experiences were able to demonstrate higher levels of empowerment than those who perceived they were disempowered as a result of the behaviour and attitudes of some families. This constructivist view is important when building the professional capacity of the early childhood workforce to engage in effective and empowering partnerships with families. It is being in empowering environments, where educators are supported to build self-efficacy and to reflect on themselves and their identity, which is critical in building an empowered profession that, in turn, can support the empowerment of parents as equal partners in the decision-making for their children.

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## **Appendix C Guiding Questions – educator interviews**

How would you describe the nature of the interactions you have with the families in the centre?

How important to you is the relationship you have with the parents of the children in the centre, and why? How have you formed this belief?

How have your experiences, values, beliefs and expectations influenced the nature of your interactions with families?

Do you have the same relationships with all parents? Why?

What are the factors that you believe influence the nature of the relationships?

How would you define the concept of partnership as it applies to parents and educators in early childhood education and care?

Would you describe your relationship with parents as being a genuine partnership? Why?

What elements are present that support the relationship as being a partnership?

How do you engage in a genuine partnership with parents at this centre? What past experiences, expectations and understandings have influenced this?



Would you define all your relationships with each family as genuine partnerships?

Why? What are the past experiences, expectations and understandings that have influenced this?

If the concept of partnership was positioned within a construct of 'mutuality, trust and reciprocity' would you identify the relationships you have with the parents as reflecting this? Why? What are your past experiences, expectations and understandings that have influenced this?

How would you describe parents' understanding of their role in the relationship? Is this the same for all? Why? What are the past experiences, expectations and understandings that you think the parents have that have influenced this?

Mutuality in the concept of partnership presents a position of equality in that all parties have equal rights and equal say in the decision making, goal setting and where there is a balance of power between the parties. Would you identify that this is true of the relationships you have with the parents? Why? What are the factors, past experiences, expectations and understandings that you believe influence this?

Family centered practice has been outlined in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (The Victorian Framework) as a key practice principle for early childhood educators, what is your understanding of this model and how would you discuss this model in relation to a concept of partnership?

Would you describe the relationships you have with parents as reflective of family centred practice? Is this so of all?

Why? How have past experiences, expectations and understandings of parents and yourself influenced this?

What are the factors that influence the successful enactment of this model in this centre?

## **Appendix D Guiding questions – parent interviews**

How would you describe the nature of the interactions you have with the early childhood educators in the centre? (Early childhood educators being all the staff who have responsibility for the care and education of the children)

What are you seeking from the relationships you have with the early childhood educators, and why? How have you formed this belief and expectation?

How would you describe the relationship that you have with the early childhood educators at the centre? Is this true of all of them? Why do you believe this to be so? What factors do you believe have influenced this? How have your past experiences, values, beliefs and expectations influenced, do you think, the nature of your interactions with the early childhood educators?

Would you define the relationship you have with the early childhood educators as a genuine partnership? Why? What are your past experiences, expectations and understandings that have influenced this?

Do you believe that parents and educators should be equal partners in the care and education of the children? Why and how would you describe your view of an equal partnership in this context? What are your past experiences, beliefs, expectations and understandings that have influenced this?

If the concept of partnership was positioned within a construct of ‘mutuality, trust and reciprocity’ would you identify the relationships you have with the early childhood educators reflecting this? Why? What are the past experiences, expectations, understandings and beliefs that have influenced this?

Mutuality in the concept of partnership presents a position of equality in that all parties have equal rights and equal say in the decision making, goal setting and where there is a balance of power between the parties. Would you identify the relationships you have with the early childhood educators at this centre as having a balance of power? Why? What are the factors, past experiences, expectations and understandings that you believe influence this?

Family centered practice has been outlined in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (The Victorian Framework) as a key practice principle for early childhood educators. Family centred practice is a model of partnership that empowers and enables parents to be equal and respected participants in the decision making and planning for their child and recognises that as a actions and situations affecting one member of the family affect all of the members.

Would you describe the relationships you have with the early childhood educators in this centre are reflective of a model of family centred practice?

Why?

## Appendix E Documents for the research

The following documents were collected and informed the analysis:

- The Procedural Manual this document is given to all families when accepting enrolment at the Centre. It is used in all the long day child care centred managed by this local government authority
- The centre newsletter – the newsletter is distributed to all families enrolled in the Centre regularly.
- ‘My Learning Journey – Meagan (Pseudonym)’

The following is a list of photographs taken of the displays and notice boards across the service.

- 75 ways to encourage children
- Information for parents – 0-2 room
- Program – 0-2 room
- Daily record of individual nappy changes (0-2 room)
- Blank Program evaluation form
- Centre information and forms
- Documentation of learning for an individual child (2)
- Children’s mural
- Centre daily routines and timetable
- Parent feedback comments from family dinner
- Photographs of families and educators from the family dinner
- Infectious diseases policy
- Children’s learning stories (2-3 room)
- Parent Information pockets (with newsletters not collected)
- Parent notice board with information on the health, the learning framework and a global invitation to share culture and skills in the centre

- The Centre philosophy
- An A2 colour poster of the poem '100 Languages of Children' (Malaguzzi)
- An A3 black and white poster of a poem – 'Just Playing' (Kidsberry)
- Large coloured poster (approx. 120 x 150cm) of the Positive Parenting (PPP) approach
- Program and Individual Learning Stories (3-5 year old room)
- Program documentation (3-5 year old room)
- 'Things we did in child care' – wall display for parents of a recent cooking experience in the 2-3 year old room
- Current Program (preschool room)
- Room specific information (preschool room)
- Room specific information (3-4 year old room)
- Wall display in foyer – Safety and Children
- Photo board of all the staff
- Activity in the 'Meeting Space'

# Appendix F Letter of Approval – Arts, Education & Human Development Human Research Ethics Subcommittee



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# MEMO

TO

DATE 22/07/2010

Dr Andrea Nolan  
School of Education  
Melton Campus

FROM

Dr Mary Weaven  
Acting Chair  
Arts, Education & Human Development  
Human Research Ethics Subcommittee

SUBJECT

Ethics Application – HRETH 10/140

Dear Dr Nolan,

Thank you for submitting your application for ethical approval of the project entitled:

**HRETH 10/140** Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an analysis of the nature of interactions between educators and parents (AEHD HREC 10/97)

<b>Editorial / Advisory Notes</b>
Item 7. Heading 'Background': amend reference to the "current Rudd Government."

The proposed research project has been accepted and deemed to meet the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)', by the Acting Chair, Faculty of Arts, Education & Human Development Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval has been granted from 16/07/2010 to 30/06/2011.

Continued approval of this research project by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC) is conditional upon the provision of a report within 12 months of the above approval date (by 16/07/2011) or upon the completion of the project (if earlier). A report proforma may be downloaded from the VUHREC web site at: <http://research.vu.edu.au/hrec.php>

Please note that the Human Research Ethics Committee must be informed of the following: any changes to the approved research protocol, project timelines, any serious events or adverse and/or unforeseen events that may affect continued ethical acceptability of the project. In these unlikely events, researchers must immediately cease all data collection until the Committee has approved the changes. Researchers are also reminded of the need to notify the approving HREC of changes to personnel in research projects via a request for a minor amendment.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 9919 9510. On behalf of the Committee, I wish you all the best for the conduct of the project.

**Dr Mary Weaven**

Acting Chair

Faculty of Arts, Education & Human Development Human Research Ethics  
Subcommittee



# Appendix G Documents sent to participants gaining consent to participate in the study



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## **EXPRESSION OF**

## **INTEREST**

### **Centre**

‘Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents’

As part of a Doctor of Education student research project, Ms Liz Rouse (student) and Associate Professor Andrea Nolan (Victoria University) are conducting research into effective partnerships between educators and families in early childhood education and care programs.

The aim of the project is to investigate the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Family centred practice is the partnership model outlined in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework as a key foundation for practice for professionals working with young children. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families.

We, the researchers, are calling for expressions of interest from early childhood education and care centres which previously participated as a trial site for the Victorian Framework and would be willing to take part in this research project.

There are two components for the data collection for the project. The first component involves seeking the involvement of 5 educators and 5 parents involved with the centre participating in an individual interview

that will be structured so as to gain insight into their understanding of the nature of the interactions between educators and the parents, the socio-cultural factors, experiences and behaviours that may influence the nature of the interaction process, and their perceptions of their interactions as occurring within a framework of family centred practice. The second component will be the collection of artefacts used by the centre with families and may include but not be limited to parent newsletters, policies, bulletin boards, program plans. The centre will remain anonymous and only discussed by broad geographic data. In any publication arising from this research, the centre will remain anonymous and only discussed by broad geographic data and all participants will be provided the opportunity to remain anonymous, and allocated a pseudonym.

If you are interested in participating please contact Carmel Phillips at the VCAA by email to [phillips.carmel.j@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:phillips.carmel.j@edumail.vic.gov.au)

If you are interested to find out more information then please contact either of the researchers.

Andrea Nolan Telephone: (03) 99197579 Email: <a href="mailto:andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au">andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au</a>	Liz Rouse Telephone: 0407 823 505 Email: <a href="mailto:rouse.ej@gmail.com">rouse.ej@gmail.com</a>
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# **INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS**

## **INVOLVED IN RESEARCH**

### **Centre Management**

#### **Your centre is invited to participate**

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled 'Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents'

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Ms Liz Rouse as part of a Doctor of Education at Victoria University under the supervision of Associate Professor, Dr Andrea Nolan from the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development.

#### **Project explanation**

The project will investigate the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families.

#### **What will the centre be asked to do?**

The centre's participation in the study will be through the involvement of five early childhood educators and five parents being asked to participate in an interview of approximately 1 hour duration (at a time and place convenient to the participants) where they will be asked a series of questions aimed at developing an understanding of the nature of the interactions that occur between parents and early childhood educators. The interview with the centre staff will be scheduled so as not to impact on the management of the program.

The centre will be asked to distribute to all parents and educators an Expression of Interest prepared by the researcher, inviting them to participate in the study. This will then be returned to Victoria University via reply paid envelopes, with participant contact details external to the centre. These respondents will then be purposefully selected on the basis of a range of demographic attributes which will include qualifications, length of involvement at the centre, family background and age. The identified participants will then be sent an Information to Participate in the

Research Form and a Consent Form which they will complete and return directly to Victoria University.

The centre will also agree to the collection of artefacts which will include a range of documents used with parents such as newsletters, photographs of parent noticeboards, parent information and fact sheets, program plans and policy documents which will be examined and analysed as they support the key findings from the interviews. The centre coordinator will be contacted directly by the student researcher to arrange a convenient time to visit the centre and collect the artefacts.

You will be asked to sign a Consent Form agreeing to the centre participating before the staff and parents are contacted inviting their participation. All interviews will be audio recorded and then later transcribed. Individual participants will be handed back the transcription for checking the accuracy of what was recorded and to enable them to make any changes they feel necessary. The interview transcripts will then be filed electronically using non identifiable pseudonyms on a password protected computer. Only the individual participant will have access to their interview transcript.

Participation will be voluntary and the centre is able to withdraw from this study at any time prior to the parents and staff signing the Consent Form. The centre will be identified in the study using a pseudonym and the suburb and address of the centre will not be identified.

### **What will the centre gain from participating?**

The centre will gain from the experience of participating in the research through the opportunity to reflect on and explore of the nature of the interactions between parents and educators and these findings will inform the literature surrounding partnership models on early childhood education and care.

### **How will the information I give be used?**

The information given by the participants will be analysed to identify common and emergent themes arising from the responses related to the nature of interactions and the factors impacting on parent / early childhood educator interactions. These findings will be used to develop guidelines for professional practice for early childhood educators to support them in the engagement of effective partnerships with families.

All information provided will be kept confidential and non identifying criteria will be used in the collection, analysis and reporting of the data.

### **What are the potential risks of participating in this project?**

It is not anticipated that there will be any risks or burdens to participants as participation is voluntary. In the case of the interviews all names of participants will be changed to ensure that the data cannot be tracked back to any individual. The centre will not be able to be identified in the study as a pseudonym will be used and the suburb and address of the centre will not be identified. In the event that participants are distressed, they will be able to consult with Ms Anne Graham, a trained psychologist ([anne.graham@vu.edu.au](mailto:anne.graham@vu.edu.au); tel: 9919 2159).

### **How will this project be conducted?**

As mentioned above, data will be collected through interviews with parents and early childhood educators and collecting artefacts used by the centre in the engagement of families. These methods are proven to be able to collect rich, descriptive data relating to the participants opinions and insights.

### **Who is conducting the study?**

The study is being conducted by the School of Education in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development at Victoria University

Principal Researcher – Associate Professor Andrea Nolan

Email: [andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au](mailto:andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au)

Ph: 99197579

Student Researcher – Ms Liz Rouse

Email: [Rouse.ej@gmail.com](mailto:Rouse.ej@gmail.com)

Phone: 0407 823 505

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Principal Researcher listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics and Biosafety Coordinator, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 4148.



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# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

## INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

### Centre management

We would like to invite your centre to be a part of a study into the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families. The study will involve 5 members of the centre staff and 5 centre parents participating in a semi-structured interview and the collection of documents used with parents which may include newsletters, information and fact sheets, program plans and policy documents.

### CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, \_\_\_\_\_ being the  
\_\_\_\_\_ (position )

of \_\_\_\_\_ (centre)

certify that I am at least 18 years old\* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent for this early childhood education and care centre to participate in the study:

*'Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents'* being conducted at Victoria University by: Ms Liz Rouse, a doctoral student at Victoria University and Dr. Andrea Nolan (Principal Investigator).

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Ms Liz Rouse ( student researcher);

and that I freely consent to staff and parents from this centre being invited to participate in the study and for the student researcher to collect samples of centre artefacts used with parents .

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw the centre from this study at any time prior to the parents and staff agreeing to participate and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise the centre in any way

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the principal researcher,

Associate Professor, Andrea Nolan PhD, ph 9919 7579

Or the student researcher

Ms Liz Rouse Mobile phone number: 0407 823 505

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics & Biosafety Coordinator, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 4148.



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# EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

## Participant

**‘Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents’**

As part of a Doctor of Education student research project, Ms Liz Rouse (student) and Associate Professor Andrea Nolan (Victoria University) are conducting research into effective partnerships between educators and families in early childhood education and care programs.

The aim of the project is to investigate the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families.

Your early childhood centre has agreed to participate in the research study. We, the researchers, are calling for expressions of interest from early childhood educators and parents/caregivers who would be willing to take part in this research project by participating in an individual interview that will be structured so as to gain insight into your understanding of the nature of the interactions between early childhood educators and parents and the factors, experiences and behaviours that may influence the nature of the interaction process. Five educators working in this centre and five parents/caregivers of children attending the centre will be selected from those interested in participating on the basis on age, gender, qualifications, family structure, and length of involvement to include as broad a sample as possible.

In any publication arising from this research, the centre will remain anonymous and only discussed by broad geographic data and all participants will be provided the opportunity to remain anonymous, and allocated a pseudonym.

If you are interested to find out more information then please complete the form below and return to the researchers in the reply paid envelope.

If you require further information please contact either of the researchers directly.

Andrea Nolan Telephone: (03) 99197579	Liz Rouse Telephone: 0407 823 505
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Email: andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au	Email: rouse.ej@gmail.com
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.....  
 .....

I am interested in participating in the research project titled: 'Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents'

**I am a parent at the centre**

**I am an early childhood educator at the centre**

**(Please indicate)**

---

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address for further contact:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **Post code** \_\_\_\_\_

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# **INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS**

## **INVOLVED IN RESEARCH**

### **Centre Parents**

#### **You are invited to participate**

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled 'Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents'

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Ms Liz Rouse as part of a Doctor of Education at Victoria University under the supervision of Associate Professor, Dr Andrea Nolan from the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development.

#### **Project explanation**

The project will investigate the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately 1 hour duration (at a time and place convenient to you) where you will be asked a series of questions aimed at developing an understanding of the nature of the interactions that occur between parents and early childhood educators. The questions will explore your reflections on the perception of the factors and experiences that may influence the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators in long day care centres. You will be asked to sign a consent form before the interview takes place. The interview will be audio recorded (with your permission) and then later transcribed. The transcription will be given back to you for checking the accuracy of what was recorded and to enable you to make any changes you feel necessary. The interview transcript will then be filed electronically using a non identifiable pseudonym on a password protected computer.

Participation will be voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study any time up to two weeks from receiving the transcribed copy of the interview as by that time the information will be non identifiable and unable to be retrieved.

### **What will I gain from participating?**

Participation in the study will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on the relationships that exist between parents and early childhood educators in early childhood education and care programs.

### **How will the information I give be used?**

The information you give will be analysed along with the information provided by other participants to identify common and emergent themes arising from the responses. These themes will then be collated to draw an understanding of the nature of the interactions between the parents and early childhood educators. These findings will be used to develop guidelines for professional practice for early childhood educators to support them in the engagement of effective partnerships with families.

All information provided will be kept confidential and non identifying criteria will be used in the collection, analysis and reporting of the data.

### **What are the potential risks of participating in this project?**

It is not anticipated that there will be any risks or burdens to participants as participation is voluntary. In the case of the interviews all names of participants will be changed to ensure that the data cannot be tracked back to any individual. The research results will be in the form of exploration of the issues identified by the data, with no identity associated with the perspectives represented in the research report. In the event that participants are distressed, they will be able to consult with Ms Anne Graham, a trained psychologist ([anne.graham@vu.edu.au](mailto:anne.graham@vu.edu.au); tel: 9919 2159).

### **How will this project be conducted?**

As mentioned above, data will be collected through interviews with parents and early childhood educators and collecting artefacts used by the centre in the engagement of families. These methods are proven to be able to collect rich, descriptive data relating to the participants opinions and insights.

### **Who is conducting the study?**

The study is being conducted by the School of Education in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development at the Victoria University

Principal Researcher – Associate Professor, Dr Andrea Nolan

Email: [andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au](mailto:andrea.nolan@vu.edu.au)

Ph: 99197579

Student Researcher – Ms Liz Rouse

Email. [Rouse.ej@gmail.com](mailto:Rouse.ej@gmail.com)

Phone: 0407 823 505

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Principal Researcher listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics and Biosafety Coordinator, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 4148.



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# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

## INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

### INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be part of a study into the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators as they reflect the principles of family centred practice as a model for engaging with parents in genuine partnerships in the care and education of their children in the early years. Through examining the nature of the interactions between parents and early childhood educators, the research will provide an informed insight into the nature of the interactions of a group of early childhood educators, and the effectiveness of the model of family centred practice in early childhood education and care programs. This insight will lead to the development of guidelines for professional learning for early childhood educators to support their practice in working in effective partnerships with families.

### CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, \_\_\_\_\_

of \_\_\_\_\_ (suburb)

certify that I am at least 18 years old\* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

*'Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents'* being conducted at Victoria University by: Ms Liz Rouse, a doctoral student at Victoria University and Dr. Andrea Nolan (Principal Investigator).

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Ms Liz Rouse (student researcher)

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

A semi-structured taped interview

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study up to two weeks from receiving the transcribed copy of the interview as I understand that after that time the information will be non identifiable and unable to be retrieved. I also understand that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the principal researcher,

Associate Professor Andrea Nolan, ph 9919 7579

Or the student researcher

Ms Liz Rouse Mobile phone number: 0407 823 505

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics & Biosafety Coordinator, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 4148.

# Appendix H Letter of approval to undertake research – DEECD



## Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Department of Education  
and Early Childhood  
Development  
GPO Box 4637  
Melbourne  
Victoria 3001

19 July 2010

Ms Liz Rouse  
School of Education  
Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development  
Victoria University  
PO Box 14428  
Melbourne 8001

Dear Ms Rouse

**RE: Application to undertake research involving the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development**

I write to you concerning your application to the Early Childhood Research Committee (ECRC) to undertake research entitled *"Effective family partnerships in early childhood education and care – an investigation of the nature of interactions between educators and parents"*.

I am pleased to inform you that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ECRC will support the research subject to the following conditions:

- The research is conducted in accordance with the documentation you provided to the ECRC;
- The provision of a copy of a formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee approval letter;
- The provision of a final report to the ECRC at the completion of the research;
- The provision of a one page summary of the outcomes of the research and how this relates to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development;
- That you provide the ECRC with the opportunity to review and provide comment on any materials generated from the research prior to formal publication. It is expected that if there any differences of opinion between the ECRC and yourself related to the research outcomes, that these differences would be acknowledged in any publications, presentations and public forums;
- That you acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research; and
- The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter, after this time the approval lapses and extensions will need to be considered by the ECRC.

If you have any further enquiries, please don't hesitate to contact the ECRC Secretariat on 03 9637 3629 or via email [hood\\_suzanne.s@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:hood_suzanne.s@edumail.vic.gov.au). The ECRC wishes you the best in your research and we look forward to seeing the results in due course.

Yours sincerely

Joyce Cleary  
Chair, Early Childhood Research Committee

