Enabling change through education for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families, through the perspectives of early childhood professionals, children and families

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List of Abbreviations

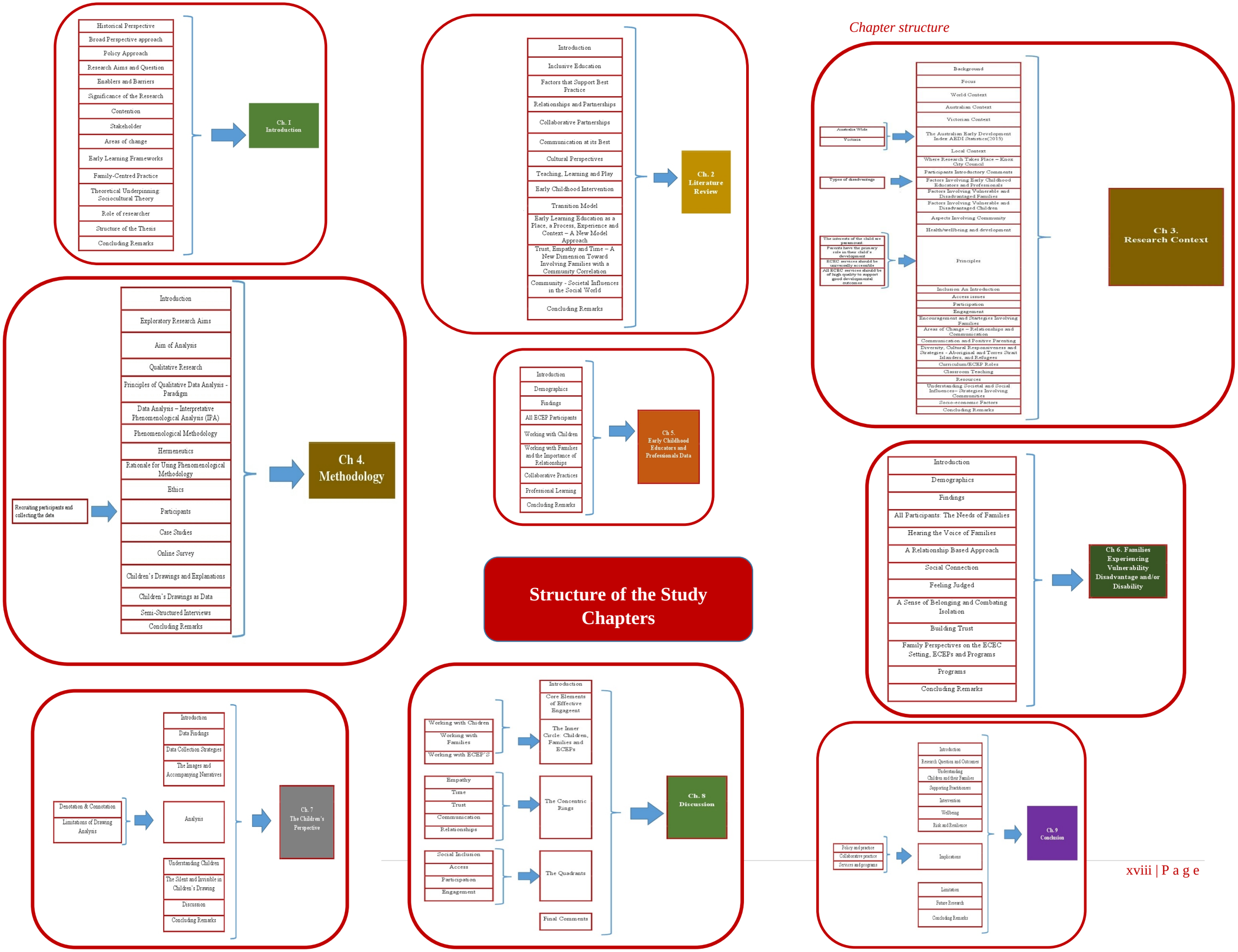
AEL	Access to Early Learning
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
BBB	Boronia, Bayswater and The Basin Project
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations – Australia
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations – Victoria
DET	Department of Education and Training
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECEPs	Early Childhood Educators and Professionals
ECI	Early Childhood Intervention
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
OH&S	Occupational Health & Safety
PD	Professional Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VCOSS	Victorian Council of Social Services
WHO	World Health Organisation

Abstract

Young children have an inalienable right to an education and this is a time of great importance to their cognitive, emotional and social development. It is necessary to support the early years as the foundation of learning. In Australia as elsewhere across the globe there is recognition that effort should be undertaken in addressing the welfare of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their families. Despite being an economically advantaged country, there are some children and families that are faced with complex factors that can make them vulnerable, disadvantaged or at risk. Social inclusion, access, participation and engagement, are key to early learning success in early childhood, a time integral to overall health, wellbeing and future role in society. Supporting a change in values through education, children and their families who are vulnerable, disadvantaged and/or who have disabilities can help break the cycle of disadvantage and transform the lives of the individual child, their families and the wider community. This study explores the enablers and barriers perceived by Early Childhood Educators and Professionals (ECEPs) and the children and families that they support. The research focuses on the importance of building respectful, empathetic, collaborative relationships that support educational engagement by children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Effective family engagement is the key to early years learning success.

This qualitative phenomenological study aligns itself with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory alongside Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Perspective (1979, 1995) on social systems and it explores the deep understandings of this group of participants. The question that drives this research is, What are the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children (including those with disabilities) and their families, in accessing, maintaining engagement and successfully learning and developing within an educational program? The ninety-three participants in this study came from three groups: children, their families and ECEPs. The data was collected via a contextualizing survey, semi-structured interviews and children's drawings. The findings revealed that the most effective relationships occur in an environment of trust and empathy which happens in a safe and protected space and which is given adequate time for relationships to be built. By supporting communication, collaboration and networking, families can gain a sense of belonging, which fosters further engagement and promotes successful social and learning outcomes for children. When ECEPs and families share in the decision-making concerning the child's development it becomes possible to foster resilience and build strong foundations for future success for all.

Chapter structure



CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

More than 200 million children under five in the developing world do not fulfil their potential. A major reason for their disadvantage is few opportunities to learn. (World Health Organisation, 2015)

The best test of a society is the quality of the response to those who may become marginalised and a value system that promotes wellbeing and openness for all its people. The way in which a society looks after its most vulnerable is the greatest reflection of its success. Education should, "promote personal development, strengthen respect for human rights and freedoms, enable individuals to participate effectively in a free society; and promote understanding and tolerance" (United Nations, 1989). Early childhood is a critical time in human development. There is now comprehensive research that shows that experiences children have in pre-birth and the early years of life set neurological and biological pathways that can have life-long impacts on health, learning and behaviour (Baxter & Hand, 2013). What happens for young children during early childhood provides the foundations for learning and development and is integral to their overall health and wellbeing, and their future contributions to society. Many Australian children and families lead healthy, inclusive lives with access to education and other services they need, however there are also other Australian children and families who are marginalised, socially isolated and excluded and require additional support and facilitated access to education and other services they need (Elliott, 2006). Some children and families are exposed to factors such as maltreatment, violence, housing instability, poverty, disability, mental health issues and substance misuse that puts them at risk of vulnerability and/or disadvantage. This research sought to determine the key enablers and barriers to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families

The early years should be a time of richness and growth for the wonderment of the child supported by the co-efforts of families and Early Childhood Educators and Professionals (ECEPs) coming together for the best possible outcomes. Education needs to take place in a safe and protected space for the child. A successful ECEC setting is welcoming, inclusive and a place where all stakeholders in a child's life can come together to put the child at the centre so they can become the best possible people they can be. The ECEC setting should offer time and space for learning, play and imagination for the child as they gain a voice, grow in their self-identity and confidence in their social, emotional and cognitive development that will

prepare them for strong foundations in lifelong learning. To involve families within this process is crucial, along with recognising the contributions that families can make to support their child's development. It is important to note that enhancing the child's social, emotional and physical environments is essential to positively influencing their development. When relationships are built between ECEPs and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, children will benefit. ECEPs are well positioned in policy, planning and development to support this success. It is noted that ECEPs consistently desire further professional development and training in many areas, particularly in working with families and in areas of communication. Through an ecological perspective a child's life-world can broaden from their everyday contexts around families, neighbourhoods and cultures within early childhood education and this wider circle is a protective factor. A new family engagement model in the ECEC sector could lead to further family involvement and a sense of belonging within community. The values of this research are intentionally based around ideologies that are humanitarian, socially just, inclusive, diverse, culturally sensitive, and involve protective factors and resiliency for the vulnerable and disadvantaged family and child. Investment in the early years is understood to have wide influence on both the economic and social aspects of society. The early years is a time that encompasses cognitive, emotional, developmental and relational growth, and fosters health, wellbeing, care and protection for the child. Social and cognitive development are important as the child develops amongst people in their life-world. As Pelo (2006) notes, educators are agents of social change. Educators can work with children to transform the possibilities for individuals and groups, and transform society to promote equity and social justice (MacNaughton, 2003; Arthur, Beecher, Death, Farmer & Dockett, 2015). The social intention of this research and the values behind it are deliberate. What is good for the child is also good for society.

Early childhood is the foundation of human development and is central to the success of a society. Governments across the world have recognised that effective investment in the early years can break down "intergenerational cycles of disadvantage", build community capacity and ensure that vulnerable children achieve best possible educational outcomes (Victorian Council of Social Services [VCOSS], 2008, p. 55). Children and families that experience vulnerability and/or disadvantage have a high tendency toward low educational outcomes. Improving their educational experience can provide a stronger foundation in cognitive and social learning that will assist in later life. The Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), (2012) asserts that, "Education and learning are critical to an individual's life chances, and education is a pathway

out of poverty and intergenerational disadvantage" (p. 11). Although there is limited specific documented research it is increasingly apparent that education can positively impact society on many levels. A better educated child may lead to "a cost effective means of improving labour market participation, reducing welfare dependence, and supporting long-term reductions in crime" but this, "remains unconfirmed" (Elliott, 2006, p. 53). The educational process and experience creates lifelong social wellbeing and can improve the economic wellbeing of all.

Early intervention for children at risk and those with disabilities and learning delays can impact greatly on their future success. It is understood that, "Intellectual delays and disabilities are conditions that can be changed or modified through early intervention" (Deiner, 2010, p. 334). ECEPs can support and protect children and their families facing vulnerability and/or disadvantage and provide significant early childhood education, care and supportive development opportunities that can positively impact their lives, "giving children the best start in life" (Arney & Scott, 2013). This must be a priority for all and an imperative for Australian society. It has been noted by the World Health Organisation (2015) that:

> High quality early childhood care and education programs can improve children's chances for success in later life. Investing in early interventions timed to take advantage of crucial phases of brain development is necessary for all children. In particular, it can improve the lives of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their families, with profound consequences for societies at large.

By researching the lived experience of educators, families and children who are a part of early childhood education and care services it is my hope to understand their world view so that it is possible to seek ways and strategies to better support the education of children and families in need. This Introduction focuses on education, health and economic issues. This is positioned in its historical perspective of early childhood education up to the current day. There is discussion of humanitarian aspects relating to this issue. Subsequently both ecological and economic perspectives are discussed.

Historical Perspective

Over the last twenty years, there has been a global shift in how societies view early childhood education and care in relation to the rights of children. In 1990 the World Conference on Education for All asserted as a goal the "Expansion of early childhood care

and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children" (Kamerman, 2007, p. 51). In 1994 the World Conference on Special Needs Education eventuated with the Salamanca Statement Article 2, "Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creative welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (Foreman & Arthur-Kelley, 2014, p. 28). Currently Australia is in:

> a time of sustained social change—of contested notions of what it means to be an Australian, of what citizenship means, and of the grounds for 'community'—it is not surprising that interest in relationships of trust and reciprocity should become acute. (Edwards, Cheers & Graham, 2003, p. 75)

As in many developed countries the divide between "the haves and have nots is widening" (Knox City Council, 2010d, p. 5). Not only is the world context changing but also so has the need for new responses to contemporary issues. Investment in vulnerable children is an investment in all children.

In employing a human rights perspective and empowerment in early childhood education and care, centres must, "take into account the views, interests and choices of children" (ACT Parliamentary Counsel, 2009, p. 13) and provide them a voice. Legislation, frameworks, models and everyday practice that support this ideology and humanitarian perspective should ensure the presence and efficacy of protective factors. As Pelo (2006) notes, "educators are agents of social change and this can be transformational". A strengths-based culture exemplifies, "respect for people's dignity, rights, differences, and similarities, a belief in people and their potential, commitment to honesty and openness, commitment to inclusion and shared decision-making" (McCashen, 2005, p. 2). These are the values aspired to in relationships between ECEPs and families. Behind this idea is the notion that inclusion concerns belonging and that empathy is a significant element of human relationships and is about connection and understanding others (Allison, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Stone & Muncer, 2011; Peck, 2015). For ECEPs, empathy can be enacted via "Holistic approaches to teaching and learning [that] recognise the connectedness of mind, body and spirit" (Victorian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 14). It is essential to attend to cognitive aspects of learning as well as the physical, social, personal, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, so that they are integrated and

interconnected. ECEPs recognise that, "the importance of reciprocal relationships and partnerships for learning. They see learning as a social activity" (Victorian Government, DEEWR, 2009, p. 14).

This research presents arguments for a new family engagement model that demonstrates how and why the elements of this model might support the success of the child and family. Slee (2006, p. 5) argues that, "a paradigm shift is required so that unequal outcomes for families and children are seen as social injustices, rather than as products of individual dysfunction or deficit". Family-centred practice "is the cornerstone alongside qualities of empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 7). A child's family is the greatest predictor toward success with a family environment that is supportive of learning and understanding (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Weiss & Stephen, 2009).

Over the years in Australia our understandings of welfare and inclusion have gradually been changing. Childcare and early childhood learning services affect the lives of many families in Australia. In 2012, around 19,400 childcare and early learning services enrolled over 1.3 million children in at least one childcare, preschool or early learning service (Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 2014). In 2013 it was estimated that there are 647,000 families with children in Victoria of which between 20% and 30% of them are experiencing significant stress in their lives (Victorian Government, DEECD, 2013).

The Victorian Government's vision to give children the best start to life (Victorian Government, DEECD, 2009) was motivated by a desire to improve the learning outcomes for children in targeted demographic areas with identified socio-economic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes. The intention was to alleviate social disadvantage (Victorian Government, DEECD, 2008a). Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasised that promoting the healthy development of children requires an ethical perspective and is crucial for economic and social investment.

The Victorian Government has developed a shared policy definition of vulnerability. In this research study this definition is used in that it is sufficiently broad to encompass all aspects of vulnerability including those at risk, in need or disadvantaged and those with disabilities. This broad definition states that children and young people are vulnerable if the capacity of parents and family to effectively care, protect and provide for their long-term development and wellbeing is limited. Vulnerability is not a precise concept. Many factors

can be involved in making a child and/or family vulnerable: family stressors, economic hardship, unemployment, business failure, gambling or homelessness, family violence, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health problems, disability and parental history of abuse and neglect. These problems are frequently multiple and complex. Parental capacity can also mitigate these risk factors. Families from particular population groups—Aboriginal families, newly arrived immigrants, families who have lived on low incomes for one year or more, young parents and families affected by disability—are over-represented among vulnerable families. The children and young people in these families may be vulnerable to abuse and neglect because their parents have a limited capacity to care for them and ensure their optimum development and wellbeing. Some vulnerable children and their families may require one off, time limited support and others may require more intensive, longer term and specific responses (Victorian Government, DEECD, 2013).

The recent report of the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning released on 20 February 2015 focused on the needs of vulnerable and at risk children and the current shortfalls in supporting their needs. Findings 5.1 and 5.2 identified that Australian and Indigenous children and those from non-English speaking backgrounds are less prepared to begin formal schooling if from socio-economically disadvantaged communities and that this phenomenon should be underpinned by further research (Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 2014). With over:

> more than 40 years of concurrent advances in the science of early childhood development, the challenge facing policy makers at the end of the first decade of the 21st century is clear—it is time to leverage new scientific knowledge in the service of generating new intervention strategies that will produce substantially greater impacts. (Shonkoff, 2010, p. 11)

Education provides, "opportunities to directly shape educational outcomes almost as soon as children are born" (Wilson, 2013, p. 19) and when these opportunities occur delays in development may be reduced promoting the ability for academic success in the future (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008).

After four decades there is now solid evidence that, "underscores the role of positive, early experiences in strengthening brain architecture and a growing understanding of how significant adversity damages brain circuits and undermines lifelong learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health" (Shonkoff, 2010, p. 24). Early intervention is essential to

improve the lives of children in need. The early childhood period is a time of both great opportunity and considerable risk, and its influence can extend over a lifetime (Scott, Arney & Vimpani, 2009). While now having recognition and scientific understanding of the positive impact the early years can have on a child's health, development and learning:

> there is still little that we know as to why these vulnerable children, families and communities are not being reached and receiving the benefit of early childhood education, far less what can be done to reduce or eliminate such disparities. (Mittler, 2000, p. 1)

In Australia there is a powerful indicator of the need for more early childhood research and intervention as, "Addressing disadvantage in the early years can end generations of disengagement for individual families and whole communities, and provide children with the opportunity to break the cycle of disadvantage" (VCOSS), 2012, p. 60). It is argued that quality education can result in a positive cycle of advantage for individual children, families and their communities. This can act as positive "social engineering" (Benard, 1991), that can enable change for these children and their families to have better quality lives, reduce long-term poverty and social disadvantage and "changing attitudes to disability ... [is] part of a broader *social justice* movement" (Foreman & Arthur-Kelley, 2014, p. 10).

Broad Perspective Approach

From a neuroscience perspective it is acknowledged that the human brain recognises and responds to the internal mental states of others (Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi & Rizzolatti, 1996; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Decety & Moriguchi, 2007; Gerdes, Segal & Lietz, 2010). Children in the early years of cognitive development are affected by the relationships of which they are a part and the role of ECEPs is crucial in ensuring that there is a protected space where a child can learn and grow within their relationships with peers and ECEPs. This is vital for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, who may not have a home environment that is beneficial to the child. To assist families ECEPs can help create a space for the child to be nurtured and feel secure in the ECEC setting.

Historically the child social work sector has been influenced by political and economic changes from the mid nineteenth century. Changing social concerns and anxieties about the family and community have influenced, "relations between the law, social security, medicine, the school and the family" (Parton, 1994, p. 716). What were deemed or considered as

respectable was determined by social workers who "fulfilled an essentially mediating role between those who were excluded and the mainstream of society" (Parton, 1994, p. 717). In the twentieth century there was a "more explicit moral analysis of relationships and behaviour … increasingly replaced by a more psycho-social approach, where the inner world of the individual was given as much attention as the relationships between people" (Parton, 1994, p. 717).

Today the role of ECEPs needs to be expanded to meet the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families. ECEPs need to adopt aspects of a social work model that negotiates relationships, morals, values, and the self-identity of the individual (and in this case the child) within its contexts. Mittler (2000) concurs that ECEPs should position their engagement within a wider childcare framework. Pragmatically, expanding the role of ECEPs requires the allocation of resources including time to address and follow up on significant issues within the everyday experiences of the child and family. Currently ECEPs often separate particular tasks, which allows for privacy and accountability, but which may hinder the development of respectful ongoing relationships with children and their families Ideally, at the everyday level it is the ECEPs who spend most time with children and are in the best position to communicate with families.

Volunteers can assist ECEPs with general matters in the ECEC settings that can free up time so that ECEPs can engage with individual children and families, for example learning more about their backgrounds, tailoring individualised planning for children's learning, and understanding family motivations for engagement. Families as volunteers can enhance the ECEC setting to provide a nurturing, empathetic environment, for example there can be opportunities for families to network with their peers, which can offer a sense of belonging. Introducing inclusive programs with families in need could create educationally transformative experiences for parents who can share their stories and ask questions around child rearing issues. Grouping families together in a trusting and safe environment where they can explore their concerns can increase feelings of being understood, and lessen insecurities, around being judged. Reducing the fear of judgment may occur, when the invisibility of the interplay of relationships and relationship-dynamics becomes visible, where families are free to express their needs, and speak about their vulnerabilities amongst a caring and accepting audience.

The provision of early years services is effected by economics, funding models and the perceptions that this is a crucial time for investment in the child for the prosperity of future society. This ideology is becoming further known, discussed and supported. From an economic perspective:

> the world's globalised economy demands its citizens become better educated if they wish to participate in the labour market and avoid the possibility of social exclusion associated with poverty and the denial of rights. In response to globalisation, in many countries of the world, educational systems are undergoing reforms, which seek to improve their effectiveness and the standards obtained by the children whom they serve. In addition, concerns about equity of provision are raised which include the move to the full inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools. (L. Cox, 2000, p. 209)

Policy Approach

Policy aspects that concern this research focus on notions of citizenship, inclusion, and social justice issues such as diversity, inclusivity, cultural awareness and competence, humanitarian values and empowering those in need. Family participation and engagement is both a key enabler and barrier as discussed in this research. For families, key relationships can strengthen the role of the citizen (Carstenson & Bason, 2012). All can actively share within community as, "family is a cornerstone of society" (Ashman & Elkins, 2012, p. 9). By understanding family motivations through a relationship perspective, the frontline sector is well-placed to support the respectful inclusion of families as collaborators in the ECEC setting. Such inclusive engagement builds a family's sense of community belonging (Roberts, 2015). From a policy perspective a new understanding of the role of the citizen and family within community should lead to the empowerment of families. As the child's first and primary caregiver and teacher, the positive experiences that parents may have at ECEC settings will ideally give them confidence that will extend into their everyday lives.

Evolving notions about who and what is a citizen now encompass inclusive, social justice and humanitarian values that will hopefully serve to create communities of support and belonging and acceptance of diversity, as well as an understanding of what are the real needs of a citizen within a community, a country, and the global world. Invisible and visible notions of who and what belongs within a community can potentially change the feelings of at risk family participants, who believe that they are being judged and marginalised, by those around

them. If these perceptions exist in a real way in ECEC settings that are arguably based around acceptance, belonging and inclusion, it is anticipated that the situation will be worse in the wider community. The economic argument toward investing in children particularly those at risk is becoming prevalent in literature, research evidence and ideology and, "there is a strong argument that expenditure on late intervention and crisis response is becoming unsustainable —rising demand and increasing complexity is creating significant long-term challenges for government budgets" (Fox, Southwell, Stafford, Goodhue, Jackson & Smith, 2015, p. 2).

Research Aims and Question

This research explores the understandings of ECEPs at the frontline of ECECs and the children and families they work with each day. It is argued that looking at the social world and the ways that people make effective changes can develop a better understanding of contemporary issues (Richardson & Prior, 2005). This research seeks out the understandings of ECEPs, families and those that have children in their early years of life, and what assists them in supporting their children's education, health, wellbeing and development. This research is driven by the following question, ***What are the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children, including those with disabilities and their families, in accessing, maintaining engagement and successfully learning and developing within an educational program?***

Enablers and Barriers

An Ecological perspective is predicated on an understanding of the critical role of relationships that develop over time. Enablers and barriers can have a synergistic result either in a positive or negative way (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This double-positive process on the cycle of disadvantage means that within these contexts, without intervention, those at risk cannot easily overcome their world, worldview, or life-world. With intervention, children and families' ability to access, participate and engage in ECEC settings achieve greater success (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, Nelms, Department of Human Services & Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2004). Before continuing it is important to clarify what is meant by the terms enablers and barriers. Barriers are recognised as those difficulties or factors that occur and can generate a situation that gives vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families little control over or empowerment in their lives (Carbone et al., 2004). Conversely, enablers are recognised as, those opportunities or factors that occur to enable, respond and improve situations for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families. The notion of

inclusion can remove barriers (Mattessich, Murray-Close & Monsey, 2001; Carbone et al., 2004; Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler & Sharma, 2013).

Merging social values with practical everyday responses can enable ECEPs and children, who are experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage and those with disabilities. Several factors can act as drivers and enablers toward greater collaborative practices in services including, the need or desire to respond to a crisis, improve service delivery, meet legislative or other requirements, and reduce costs. Essentially, these can be distilled to two themes: responding and/or improving—often occurring in tandem.

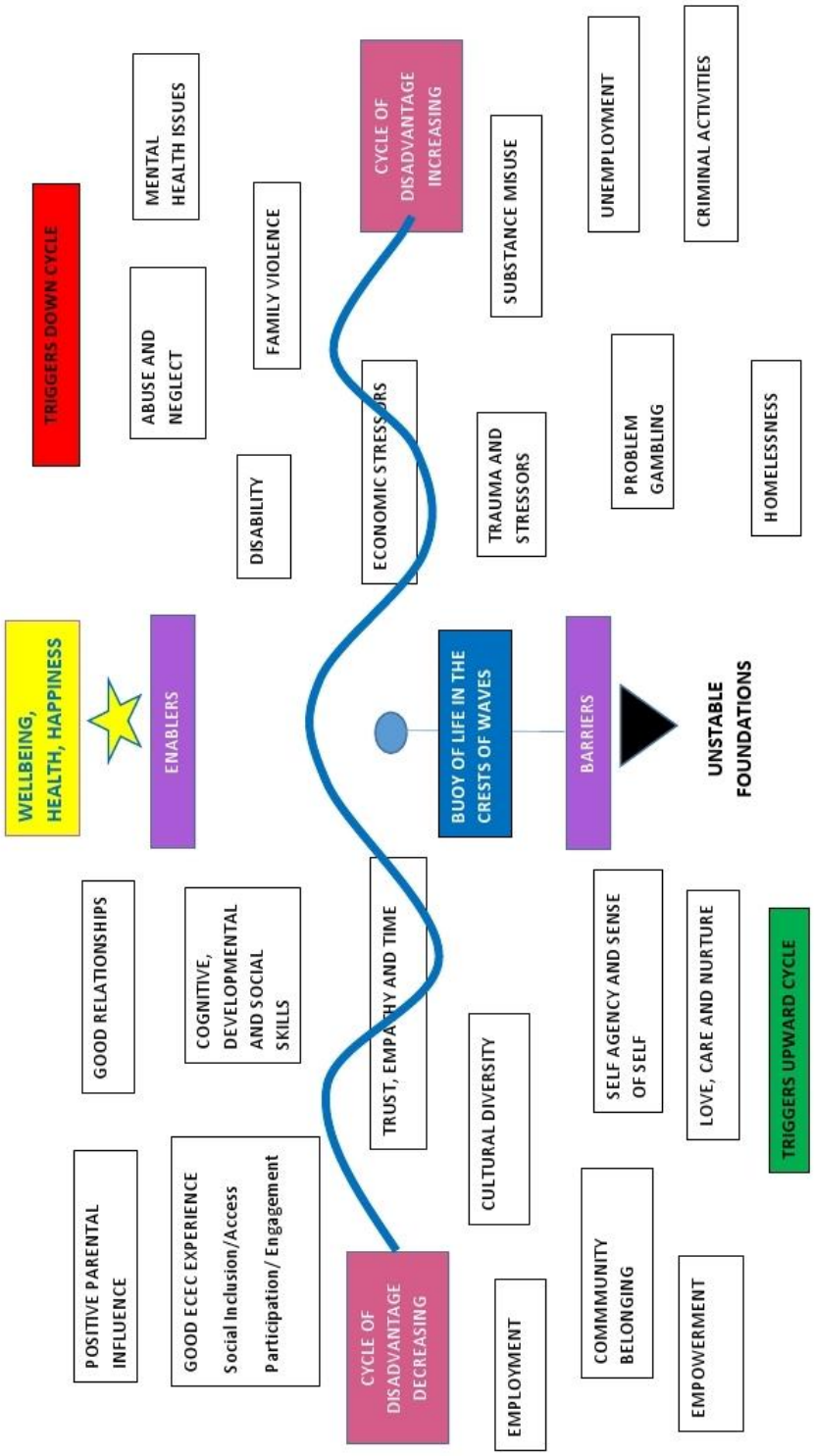


Figure 1 Enablers and barriers to engagement

The enablers and barriers diagram (*Figure 1*) shows the way positive and negative influences can buoy an individual or family, particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. It is like a boat that bobs on the ocean carried by waves that allow it to stay afloat with its anchoring in the sand which is much like the way resiliency and protective

factors give a child or family a strong foundation. The boat must live in the turbulence of the waves. This represents the cycle of disadvantage in continual turbulence, ready to set the boat adrift, or to keep it stable, where it is difficult to find days where their sea is calm and therefore where they can find rest from their internal angst, stressors and difficulties at home.

Significance of the Research

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the future of society, its children, its individuals, communities and ideals. Early childhood is a "critical window of opportunity for creating virtuous cycles that help break intergenerational transmission of poverty" (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009, p. 44). Looking at early childhood education and care through the lens of ECEPs, vulnerable families and their children, it is possible to gather a wide range of data from participants with different perspectives and to discover across a context, information that supports and inhibits this process and experience. This research is timely. Society's values and social and economic changes over the last era have meant that we are facing a change in society's structure that impacts all people. Over the last era there has occurred a major social and economic shift (Richardson & Prior, 2005, p. 310). Contemporary difficulties and problems have altered dramatically from those of the past, requiring a change in values and strategies needed to address these issues. To improve the state of ECD, global communities need to support the conditions for families to nurture their children's health, wellbeing and educational opportunities (Australian Futures Project, 2015, p. 24).

Contention

The early years are vital in a child's health, development and learning. There is still little known as to why vulnerable children, families and communities are not being reached to receive the benefits of early childhood education. A clear understanding of what impacts the provision of services at the grass roots level is essential for change.

The early years are important. From the lived experience perspective of the coalface of education, the perspectives of ECEPs, children and their families, this research will engage with different stakeholder groups to discover what difficulties (barriers) and solutions (enablers) they experience, each from their own perspective on the everyday level. Research that explores the lived experience of participants is essential to understand everyday experiences. This is crucial for real and successful change. Ultimately this research will make recommendations about what is working well and seek ways to eliminate what is not working

well. From this study a model of efficacious practice will be proposed that may enhance the work of ECEPs, vulnerable children and their families, and communities.

This study is supportive of the positive synergistic effects enablers can have on the lives of those at risk and seeks to be relevant to today's need. This research addresses a dire societal need for understanding what effects the lives of families and their children, how education can play a role in their lives, the practice wisdom of today, the changing structure of society and understanding the role of communities and socio-economic inequality. This study is unusual in that it asks both the providers and users of services concurrently about what they think is important and effective.

Stakeholders

> Under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009), protecting children is everyone's responsibility: parents, communities, governments and business all have a role to play. The National Framework provides the foundation for improving the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children.
>
> The joint protocol, involving the Department of Human Services Child Protection, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Licensed Children's Services and Victorian schools, ensures we have a unified and consistent approach that defines roles and responsibilities to protect the safety and wellbeing of all Victorian children and young people. (DEECD & DHS, 2010)

Family, community, government, voluntary organisations, and business groups "must be made to mesh coherently, so that the failings of one are offset by the reliable and tailored strengths of the others" (Richardson & Prior, 2005, p. 310). In such a way an individual child's context and life-world is broadened through diverse interactions in a variety of relationships within different environments allowing them more opportunity for development, and an expansion of their contexts. For collaboration to occur, "In essence bridges must be built from each side and meet in the middle; neither side owns the bridge and it requires reliance on the complementary strengths of both disciplines to ensure structural integrity" (Perry, Kaufman & Knitzer, 2007, p. 10) together with sharing "the reins of knowledge and power". This can occur as both structural in terms of service partnerships and carries with it the positive notion of the collaborative process in itself.

Areas of Change

Without understanding what occurs at the coalface it is impossible to implement real change. Researching the lived experience of ECEPs, and the everyday experience of at risk families and children the data will address four levels of change: Systemic/Policy, Service/Organisational, Children and Families—Negotiated everyday practices in response to their needs, and Supporting ECEPs. While this research began by seeking to understand lived experience from these levels, the data has extended into other areas which have come to be seen as paramount, especially that around relationships. There are, "interrelated levels: the individual practitioner, the organisational setting; and the wider policy context ... in addition to individual practitioner factors affecting role performance, there are likely to be strong motivational factors operating within the organisational context" (Scott, 2009, p. 40). Attitudinal enablers can occur at the Systemic/Policy level when there is, "a whole-of-government ethos which is strong in a particular political and public sector environment, then it will be easier to promote more joined-up service delivery" (Scott, 2009, p. 41). Attitudinal factors and values such as inclusion can assist in the practical attempts to give access, participation and engagement to vulnerable families and their children. At the various levels different aspects toward the change process can take place, for example, "Strong enabling policy and fiscal infrastructure, at the state and federal levels that signals a long-term commitment to a more integrated approach to service delivery" (Perry, Kaufman & Knitzer, 2007, p. 10). At the Service/Organisational level ECEPs articulated that, accessible, easy to understand communication about the service is crucial for vulnerable families.

When various stakeholders come together, each with their own strengths and enabling qualities, great things can occur for the lives of the vulnerable children, which must always be the focus. The sharing of knowledge and expertise about education, care and developmental practice is part of the focus of this research study and aims to openly seek new outcomes for service delivery, practice and professional training, leading to a new framework enabling tailored ECEC for those children and families who are disadvantaged and/or vulnerable.

Social engineering as an aspect of intervention means that favourable conditions for families can either be generated naturally and/or engineered with the aim to advance wellness for the child and spuriously for the family. To develop the skills necessary to master the tasks life presents, a child's experience in education is essential to assist in shaping their efficacy,

sense of self, sense of control, and reduce potential misbehaviour and delinquency (Cowen, 1991).

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children can, through their relationships, become an active part of society and be fulfilled alongside their everyday peers. Frontline strategies from those working within the legislative, social and educational frameworks, is essential. Research can produce frontline strategies to change policy, practice and behaviour (instrumental use); to change levels of knowledge, understanding, and attitudes (conceptual use); and to justify a position or action or inaction in a particular area (symbolic use) (Amara, Ouiment & Landry, 2004). Without an ideology to support change progress cannot occur. Ideology when followed by openness is the only way to make real change. It is necessary to create such dialogues around significant issues that may seem sensitive or even perhaps uncertain, so that important truths can come to the foreground to be debated and given due consideration.

It is essential to foster families' understanding of their child by sharing decision-making and giving advice on how they can further support their child's development at home and in the community (Victorian Government, DEECD, VEYLDF, 2009/10). This includes responding to children with effective and supportive relationships that involve empowerment, empathy, positive peer relationships, allowing children to be involved in decision-making, respecting children's emotions, encouraging social responsibility, a sense of self, self-efficacy and boundaries. It is thought that families are the primary influence in a child's early years and know their children best. Families have ideas and motivations about their child's education and the desire to be included in the decision-making regarding their child. At times they may need to seek help and guidance from ECEPs. Potentially ECEPs in their extended role may be able to provide information and modelling for the family, particularly those struggling with vulnerability and disadvantage, to guide and support them, to create protective factors for their child at home. This will give their children stronger foundations to prepare for the future. Many parents, not just those who might be at-risk often find that when their child is born they do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to always know what to do, what is expected of them, what developmental milestones their child should reach and how to support and respond to their child. At the Children and Families level some of the consistent key themes expressed were the importance of social connection, a sense of belonging, combating isolation, seeking trust and feelings of inclusion. A significant number of parents confided that they were reluctant to seek assistance after previous negative experiences, as they feared stigmatisation and criticism of their parenting skills.

Early Learning Frameworks

The fundamental components of a child's life are characterised by *belonging*, *being* and *becoming* within their context, as a child needs to thrive within this life-world (Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). Further, protection, inclusion, support, resiliency, validation and empowerment impact alongside these ideals as part of a child's fulfilment. *The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF), (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2013) understands *Belonging* as when children feel safe, secure and supported, and able to grow in confidence to explore and learn through their relationships. *Being* in Early childhood is a time to *Be* to seek and make meaning of the world, a time to play, try new things, have fun, and experience the joys and challenges in everyday life. *Becoming* occurs as children grow towards reaching their full potential, developing and shaping their identity, knowledge, understandings, capabilities, skills and relationships. Early childhood reflects rapid growth and learning, and significant change, toward participating fully and actively in society. The educational context can and needs to support this process so that children at risk during this *sensitive period* are given the opportunity to grow, develop and prepare for their place in the world (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

The principles of the EYLF (2013) stress communication and underlines the importance of building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships and partnerships that are equitable, respect diversity, support ongoing learning and encourage reflective practice. ECEPs have expressed their desire for more education in working with adults to assist parents and their children in achieving a successful ECEC experience. Effective teaching should engage the child and their family, deliver high expectations, and develop resilience, independent thinking and good social skills. Throughout the EYLF a number of practices and strategies are identified such as holistic approaches, responsiveness to children, learning through play, appropriate assessment strategies, management of learning and transitions and cultural competence. These principles and practices are intended to form a common ground for advocates, educators and policy makers to discuss and communicate across a variety of services. The National Quality Framework (NQF) (2012a), raises quality and drives continuous improvement and consistency in Australian education and care services. In the Victorian context of this research the NQF aligns with the EYLF and the VELDF (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2016).

Family-Centred Practice

Family centred practice is made up of a set of values, behaviours, skills, knowledge, attitudes and approaches for working in partnership with children and their families. This model was developed by Dunst, Trivette and Deal (1988) focused on empowering and enabling families. The model has since been expanded to a Helpgiving Practices model (Dunst & Trivette, 2009a), which focuses on effective capacity-building family-centred help giving. Family-Centred Practice is considered the foundation for best practice and recognises the pivotal role of families in their children's lives and that every family should be supported and encouraged and treated with respect (Law, M., Rosenbaum, P., King, G., King, S., Burke-Gaffney, J., Moning, J., Szkut, T., Kertoy, M., Pollock, N., Viscardis, L. & Teplicky, R. (2003).

At the Systems/Policy level the need for policies, frameworks and best practice models are essential to guide ECEPs and inform them of strategies in working amongst different stakeholder groups. Policies, frameworks and best practice models provide a, "common language for both parents and professionals but there is a gap in current research and literature around the definitions of empathy" (Gerdes et al., 2010, p. 2327), which is essential to relationships and understanding others (Allison et al., 2011; Peck, 2015). It is critical to understand the varied and sometimes difficult life circumstances for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children and their families so that ECEPs are able to deliver appropriate, evidence based care and educational approaches that can best enhance the learning, development and wellbeing of these children and support their families within the ECEC setting. In daily engagement with vulnerable children and families, professionals often encounter too many stumbling blocks, and only occasional windows of opportunities (Roberts, 2015, p. 3).

A strategic service approach for children and families must be family-centred and offer "advice and support together with evidence-based information about key topics such as immunisation, nutrition, reducing the risk of sudden infant death, smoking cessation and injury prevention, as well as informing them about available services" (Oberklaid, Baird, Blair, Melhuish & Hall, 2013, p. 3). Keeping families well informed and engaged can support the individual child and increase family participation as part of a collaborative process in the child's education. Other factors, such as family support and parent training programmes, early

childhood education and care, and the early detection of actual or potential developmental or behaviour problems can assist in the future outcomes of vulnerable children.

Theoretical Underpinning: Sociocultural Theory

The key theory underpinning this research is sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture and that of social interaction that plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice, "first, on the social level and later, on the individual level; first between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological) ... All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 5). Vygotsky believed everything is learnt on two levels. First, through interaction with others, and then integrated into the individual's mental structure. An aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the idea that the potential for cognitive development is limited to a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A teacher or more experienced peer is able to provide the learner with, "scaffolding to support the student's evolving understanding of knowledge domains or development of complex skills" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Cognitive development occurs through, "internalisation [and] is conceived of as a representational activity, a process that occurs simultaneously in social practice and in the human brain/mind and in the internal world becomes constructed around the social world, and makes cognitive imprints" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 196). This study looks at the lived experience of the participants; the frontline of ECEC and families and children taking part in the early years services. This process attempts to map their social world and relies on the understanding of relationships. Vygotsky's (1978), "sociocultural theory looks at how children integrate their social context into their cognitive, learning and behavioural development". This focus is aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological perspective which in turn influenced Guralnick's Developmental Systems Model which is a model to guide early interventions in early childhood programs for "vulnerable children and their families and covers core principles such as a developmental framework, integration and inclusion" (Guralnick, 2001). Eco-cultural systems acknowledge that children are intense observers of everyday occurrences and interactions in all contexts (Fleer, Edwards, Kennedy, Ridgway, Robbins & Surman, 2006). By participating in interactions or events with others, children also influence the behaviour and responses of others (Rogoff, Paradise, Media Aranz, Correa-Chavez & Angelillo, 2003).

Sociocultural constructivism seeks to explain how the world shapes the learners. It is a theory of knowledge as co-constructed then internalised and the social and cultural environments heavily influence knowledge construction. The use of sociocultural theories in this research study reflects the notion of different contexts, in which stakeholders (children, their families and ECEPs) are a part that can affect their development and their culture and society and can affect each of them differently (Berk, 2009). As highlighted Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory are used in this research. These theories resonate with the values and context of this study that concerns ECEPs and families working together to create a rich understanding about the child and family in the context in which the child's learning is taking place within the ECEC service and in the context of the partnerships formed between them. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective looks at the life-world of the individual child within its various contexts; family, school and community environment alongside cultural influences that play a part in how a child's views may be formed. Through diversity and an expansion of these contexts a child can have greater opportunities for growth and learning, especially when some contexts are complex and difficult. Education is one context where social engineering can be used as a vehicle of change. Educational opportunities and diverse influences can lift a child from a challenging life-world and give them greater chances to achieve successful outcomes. The most salient features of the social environment for families are not the formal early childhood and early childhood intervention services, but the personal support networks and community environments in which families live. Ecological systems theory also informs one of the key features of family-centred practice —that families should be helped to utilise family and community-based resources in preference to scarce professional resources.

The early years, "can be identified as a *sensitive period* for later school success…minor adjustments in the trajectory of development in this period may have disproportionate effects on the direction of the child's school career … [and] warrant considerable attention" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2006, pp. 494-495). The interplay between the child and its context and within relationships is dynamic, synergistic, and can have positive outcomes for the individual and the wider context for the community, when the education process is supported by all stakeholders (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). It is imperative that, "Context-sensitive policies that consider relationship dynamics [should] be well developed with respect to special education and family involvement" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p. 502). Best circumstances for a child would be to have, "a healthy ecology [that] would promote connectedness and flexibility among the social contexts that surround

the child and be characterised by high quality communication and contact" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p. 505). An ecological perspective on collaboration and partnership building is an effective tool to identify gaps and strengths in educational systems. Ideally positive responses are sought from those participating in the collaborative process (coordinators of pre-schools, family workers, transition intervention coordinators and research associates) (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999).

Resiliency factors for some children are sometimes naturally in a child's "temperament [which] does have stability even from infancy through to adulthood—but this does not mean that it cannot change or respond to environmental conditions" (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Farmer & Dockett, 2015, p. 84). The role of educators who work with vulnerable and disadvantaged families can model behaviours and attitudes, and guide parents in their motivations and practices toward their child's learning to support families through their child's early years. This can occur through positive foundational learning based around positive emotive factors around security and trust and in encouraging their developmental needs through education. There is a gap in understanding about, "how the nature and quality of individual teacher-child interactions in infant/toddler childcare play a role in development" (Hazel, Oppenheimer, Technow, Young & Franklin, 2014, p. 221) as well as, the factors around parent/child resiliency learning and development. Family resilience itself is a protective factor for the child and perhaps as educators support families in becoming more resilient, the child will experience these positive repercussions.

This study adopts a relationship-based focus. All deliberations, all approaches and all decisions surrounded by a milieu of complexities of the social world, making such change challenging, as various social worlds map themselves to one another. By impacting one world (or one stakeholder group) the dynamics themselves, are part of the crucial process, and the process is part of the outcome, that leads us to the assumption that basic human tenets and the communities they are built from could be said to be somewhat similar.

Societal nuances often reflect issues and values of being a contributor in society. Communities may feel that all their citizens need to make some kind of contribution in an exchange of social, economic or equitable worthiness. It is imperative that communities embrace all citizens and the feelings, perceptions and judgments they may bring. This social exchange might be part of this invisibility but a bridge between these two should be found

between the community (or society) and the individual who requires such an exchange (in the form of a contribution). That invisible gap needs to be crossed for those who are disadvantaged. With transparent and negotiated values it is important to share with families, issues and concerns about parenting. Segregation and marginalisation remain, which makes it imperative that intentional social exchange occurs. In this it is necessary to seek out families, and acknowledge their values, beliefs and difficulties, to understand how can we empower and engage them to become part of their wider environment. Social inclusion is both a value and a practice that encompasses such values as diversity, inclusion, cultural sensitivity and equity. With a social justice agenda there is the potential to change society's values through policy, planning and practices to positively affect the lives of individuals and communities. While disadvantage is a wider concept and can encompass many things, inclusion can blanket across many different issues of vulnerability, inequality as well as economic difficulty. Marginalisation and inclusion sit in opposition to one another. Yet this contradiction is not simple, for to include can empower and often relies on a proactive deliberate action to what may sit in society in the forms of social exclusion and bias, and what may occur without this deliberate intervention. While the global, national, state and local policies have changed, the frameworks of various initiatives are now focussing on the voice of the child and family and the positive and necessary changes to be made to ensure they receive an effective early years education, recognising that this can affect the wellbeing of society. Through a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, we have learnt that context and life-worlds are based on relationships and revolve around a social compass.

Table 1 presents a brief outline of approaches and responses to the issues and ideas, supported by this research and considered in a new model for the early years sector.

Types of Disadvantage and Vulnerability—Approaches—Responses

Table 1

A New Model—Early Childhood Education and Care—A Place, Process and Experience

ECEPs Process	Trust, Empathy and Time
Ideology	Humanitarian Rights
Value-Based Approach	Social Inclusion, Diversity and Cultural Competence
ECEC Setting	Sacred and Protective Space
Focus	Child as the Focal Point
Empowerment	Understanding Free Agency
Relationship-Based Approach	Working Together Collaboratively
Teaching/Educating	Guidance Approach
Foundational Issues	Protective Factors for Families and Children
Tools	Communication
Cross-sector Service Delivery	Networking and Partnerships
Professional Development and Training	Adult Capacity Building/Adult Teaching Model
Role of Communities	Seeking Citizenship for Families and Children
Needs and Stressors in the Lives of Contemporary Families and Communities	Understanding Changing World and Family Structures

Role of Researcher

Dawson (2009) defines social research as the, "deliberate study of other people for the purposes of increasing understanding and/or adding to knowledge" (p. 9). I seek to identify strategies that will increase understanding in education and effect social change. I firmly believe that success within a society can be not just economic but social and the positive impact this can have on the wellbeing of all people in society to change the cycle of disadvantage. I believe strongly in supporting people to empower and assert their own humanitarian rights and ideals. I am genuinely committed to applying further research to social inclusion, access and participation for those experiencing disadvantage and supporting

the development of new knowledge across ECEC settings that informs and supports the work of ECEPs to achieve more enhanced educational outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families in ECEC settings. I understand that I will be involved in the role of both outsider (etic) and insider (emic) during this research. I am an experienced early childhood educator and leader and my (insider) understanding of the role of participants and this research context may be advantageous. I need to position myself as an (outsider), and refrain from my own beliefs and assumptions and capture the information I receive directly from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

I approached this research study from the perspective of both insider and outsider but eagerly sought out the collaborative approaches to which qualitative research really lends itself. This allowed me to be at once set aside from the findings but at the same time open to new answers, new discoveries and new ideas. Once the analysis was completed I could harness my own knowledge and practice wisdom, refer to contemporary literature and evidence in the field. Working as a pre-school teacher and early childhood trained professional and leader for many years gave me some insight into the experiences of ECEPs. From my experiences I learnt that time was of the essence and that I felt the need for further professional development. Also my experience working with children with disabilities gave me some practice wisdom and knowledge, and a good understanding of the difficulties children and their families experienced. When I began my research I felt both an insider as a fellow ECEP and an outsider standing back to examine present understandings of how practice worked in this sector. In the research process I let the data speak for itself applying a phenomenological approach. My insider perspective gave me the ability to communicate empathetically with ECEPs and my social justice approach encouraged children and family participants to feel safe and comfortable in expressing their feelings and thoughts. I felt privileged by the amount of trust given to me by all my participants in the interviews and the drawing activity. All concerned, myself included, found that trust facilitated collaborative engagement during which my participants expressed feelings of acknowledgement and validation.

Having worked in ECECs and through my understanding of literature in the field, in this research I was able to:

> focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and

personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal (Berger, 2015, p. 220).

While using reflexivity I was able to be aware of my own biases and assumptions, and used the process of bracketing. Within an interview or research process, "the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective" (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Reflecting on this research, I felt that I could enact my social justice beliefs and build trust and empathy with my participants. As the research unfolded, the importance of relationships became very apparent. From my position as a researcher, it was a successful study that truly opened up my eyes to many issues: relationships/communication, belonging/togetherness, inclusion/exclusion, partnerships/collaboration.

Structure of the Thesis

Following this introduction (Chapter 1), there will be a discussion of the relevant, substantive research literature (Chapter 2), the research context (Chapter 3) and the methodological approach selected (Chapter 4). In the following there will be a presentation of contextualising information and data finding relating to the ECEPs, Families, and Children (Chapter 5, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 respectively). Then there will be a discussion of the findings (Chapter 8) and a conclusion (Chapter 9) that will also include concluding remarks.

In recognition that examiners may not be able to read this work in one sitting, I have summarised prior contents and restated key aspects at strategic points during the chapters.

Concluding Remarks

Mittler (2002) states that, "Inclusion is a vision, a road to be travelled, but a road without ending and a road with all kinds of barriers and obstacles, some of them invisible and some of them in our own heads and hearts" (p. xi). Social inclusion, access, participation, engagement are some ways to improve the success for the ECEC process and effective communication is the foundation of education (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008).

Empathy, time and trust are at the core of all effective relationships and generate a shared space for engagement and communication.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

> This notion of community and context is further endorsed by educators to encourage a child to, "cultivate a sense of place—a belonging to a particular patch of earth and sky' that impacts upon their inner-world". (Pelo, 2008, p. 121)

In the following Literature Review included, is an international policy context for inclusion in education and significant empirical work on the early intervention programs that have been shown to reduce the factors associated with disadvantage and low educational outcomes. Factors that support best practice models including access, family-centred and strengths-based practice, cultural sensitivity and inclusion approaches within (ECEC) services and schools, early intervention/early years learning frameworks, a transition model and early learning education as a place, a process, experience and context will be explored. The early years are the foundations for lifelong learning, development, health and wellbeing and the ECEC environment can be used as a platform to facilitate and monitor these aspects, support social inclusion for all and enable change.

Inclusive education and inclusion are contentious terms that might be inappropriate due to a possible misconception in the language toward and in the field of disabilities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO): The *Salamanca Statement*, first stated in 1994 that inclusive schools were the most effective way to counter discriminatory approaches and attitudes towards students. International legislation and policy subsequently evolved to challenge exclusionary practices and focus attention on equity and access to high-quality education for all, while respecting diversity (UNESCO, *Inclusive education*, 2008). According to UNESCO, *Policy guidelines* (2009), "an inclusive education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive—in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities" (p. 8). Article 24 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises that education should be accessible, "without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity … within an inclusive education system at all levels". It is widely acknowledged, nonetheless, that children with disability continue to experience different forms of exclusion which vary depending upon their disability, domicile, and the culture or class to which they belong (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2013).

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child recognises the inherent dignity, equality and inalienable rights of children and is an instrument of international significance and represents a virtually global view about children (Nyland, 2009). It espouses how governments across the globe can work together to ensure that all children's rights are honoured and protected. A human rights perspective has had less of an impact on policy, provision and practice in Australia and it has not generally applied to understanding the early childhood education and care practice in young children (Nyland, 2009).

It is widely understood that education can seriously impact the lives of children at risk. Facilitating social inclusion, access and allowing all children to participate and engage in education to the fullest extent possible, are fundamental to any society that sees itself as fair, equitable and high quality, in its service planning and delivery. Addressing these issues is a complex process and involves bringing stakeholders together and encouraging open discussion, strengthening relationships, and working collaboratively. ECEPs who value social justice alongside an ecological perspective consider, "sensitive teaching and learning … honoring individual and group identity" and the importance of, "play and ample time for exploration as healthy for development and learning and communication between key partners" (Pelo, 2008, para. 5–6). ECEPs frequently seek further professional development and training opportunities due to a lack of experience or training as, "special education and related service expertise and teacher education for inclusion is not in place to support teachers to work inclusively" (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler & Sharma, 2013, p. 16). Time constraints are noted as a barrier to effective collaboration, training, and family-centred approaches that are considered best practice in helping the child and their family.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education can be fraught with complexities and is surrounded by wider societal concepts and attitudes such as community responses to disability, socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity and culture. There is debate concerning inclusion for all (Shaddock, MacDonald, Hook, Girocelli & Arthur-Kelly, 2009) and:

> inclusion implies that if participation becomes an issue for any student, whether arising from disability, gender, behaviour, poverty, culture, refugee status or any other reason, the desirable approach is not to establish special programs for the newly

> identified individual or group need, but to expand mainstream thinking, structures, and practices so that all students are accommodated. (Forlin et al., 2013, p. 9)

As mentioned in Chapter one, the Victorian Governments' vision to give, "all children the best start in life" was motivated by a desire to improve the learning outcomes for children in targeted demographic areas with identified socio-economic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes. The intention was to alleviate social disadvantage (Victorian Government, *Improving Victoria's Early Childhood Workforce*, 2008). It is widely known that, "education is a key driver of economic and social success for individuals, employers and nations" and now with significant "empirical evidence … [there is] significant scope for education to play a role in influencing the economic and social situations of people" (Machin, 2006, p. 7). Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasised that promoting the healthy development of children is both an ethical imperative and a critical economic and social investment.

In a critical review of international research (Melhuish, 2004a) explored the impacts of early years provision on young children from disadvantaged backgrounds and identified that disadvantaged children do better in settings where there are socially mixed groups of children from different social backgrounds, rather than in settings catering mostly for children from disadvantaged families. This has implications for services in areas of social disadvantage. Ideologically, "with such diversity in outcomes, it is extremely difficult to ascertain with any consistency the outcomes being achieved by students with disability in Australia" (Forlin et al., 2013, p. 29). Supporting diversity within an inclusive environment is helpful for relationship-based approaches to education. Quality facilities that are safe and accessible, a structure that allows for staff to interact appropriately with children, consistent adult-child interactions and supervision, well-trained staff who are committed to supporting children and the delivery of a developmentally appropriate curriculum were seen as advantageous. The interaction between the child's education setting and home really does matter and ECEC settings have been identified as boosting children's confidence, social skills and improving their motivation to do well, leading to educational success and giving children a better foundation for success at school and in their future life. UNESCO, *Education: Addressing exclusion* (2012) asserts, that by enabling children with special and diverse needs through supporting inclusion and by working against marginalisation, these students can achieve better outcomes.

The impacts of the care and education of children at risk and preschool settings has been the subject of much significant empirical work such as with the High Scope/Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart, Montine, Xiang, Barnett, Bellfield & Nores, 2005), The Abecedarian Project (Sparling, Ramey & Ramey, 2007) and the Head Start Program (Deming, 2009). These three early intervention programs have been shown to reduce the factors associated with disadvantage and low academic achievement through adolescence and into adulthood. All of these programs were implemented in the United States of America. Children living in poverty are understood to be significantly more likely to experience delays in language, early cognitive and social-emotional development at school entry that undermine their later educational achievement. Much of this is due to lack of opportunity and support that keeps them in the cycle of disadvantage. Over time, the perceived achievement gap between these children and their peers widens (Janus & Duku, 2007; Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008).

A substantial amount of research has been devoted to developing and evaluating models of ECEC for children perceived as disadvantaged (Weikart & Schweinhart, 1997; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). This research started some decades ago with highly controlled randomised trials of several ECEC programs (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein & Weikart, 1984; Gray & Klaus, 1987). The characteristics of these and other effective early intervention programs are described by Moore and McDonald (2013), who state that:

> early intervention programs that demonstrate the following characteristics are likely to be the most effective, "targeting high risk or highly disadvantaged children, of sufficient duration and intensity, involving a direct teaching component (i.e. an education program delivered directly to children and delivered by education professionals) and starting early. (Moore & McDonald, 2013, p. 3)

Overall, it is important that early intervention programs and initiatives implemented in Australia are evaluated. Much of the existing literature regarding what works, comes from North America and we need to learn more about the context-specific aspects of effective early intervention in Australia (Melhuish, 2004b). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) shared similar findings to these early intervention programs that have had the greatest impact upon reducing disadvantage in the long-term for children at risk (Melhuish, 2004b). For such children the educational experience needs to be identified differently than for their

everyday peers as the trajectory of success requires a greater focus and deeper look into relationships, social skills and development that can give them what they require to achieve to their best abilities.

Teachers, curriculum, and changing attitudes can be used as tools to improve the ECEC experience. Foreman and Arthur-Kelley (2014) recognise that, "school culture reflects society's culture" (p. 105). It is noted that, "inclusion and exclusion begin in the classroom" (Mittler, 2000, p. 94). Through, "communication among stakeholders, responsive curriculum that supports a change in values with reflective practice and individualised learning principles" (Deiner, 2010, p. xviii), there can be great strides within an educational environment, toward inclusion in the wider community and for the success of the individual child.

Factors that Support Best Practice

The aim of inclusion is now at the heart of both education and social policy in Australia that acknowledges people's shared humanity, celebrates diversity and promotes acceptance, belonging and participation, and is also an agent for social change, working to overcome deprivation and disadvantage and to promote social inclusion (Fullarton, 2002; Carbone et al., 2004). A social justice approach is:

> at the core of our present belief system about the education of students with additional needs [and] is reflected in the ideas of human rights, equity and social justice". [Although], "the principle [of] social justice, is difficult to define … for most educators … social justice means the elimination of injustice to students by ensuring equity in access to education for these groups". (Foreman & Arthur-Kelley, 2014, p. 49)

Inclusive education practice encompasses social values, evidence-based strategies and practical approaches to humanitarian ideals in the various contexts of the individual child.

Research indicates that active participation in quality ECEC programs enable children in need to experience positive learning and development opportunities, lessening or eliminating the effects of disadvantage. As this time is influential in developing social skills and cognitive development, these positive educational outcomes can tie in with positive life outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Schweinhart, 2005; Grace & Bowes, 2010; Sayer,

2010a). Participation must be meaningful and sustainable for a family within the context of their own cultural and social circumstances (Grace & Bowes, 2010) with a, "shared mission, effective partnerships—mutual trust, and a positive perception of relationships" (Pianta et al., 1999, p. 118). Important factors that support best practices include access, and family-centred practices that are values based.

Access to inclusive services is paramount. Currently there is ongoing commitment from the Victorian Government to support vulnerable children and their families. Access reduces isolation, and provides opportunities for early years' education to give children the foundational life skills and educational experiences that can positively impact on future health, employment and educational outcomes (Elliot, 2006). Family-centred practice is about respectful relationships, a collaborative and strengths-based approach and recognises that the cornerstone of society is family (Ashman & Elkins, 2012). Alongside family-centred practice, "sensitivity to cultural issues, and involving fathers [is important, and] positive communication strategies will also help achieve better outcomes" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 57). It is crucial to, "engage families in the education of their children so that this process is supported and families' engagement and participation can be a helpful solution to children" (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008). Families can, "face barriers, impeding factors, and [still utilise their] ability to action toward partnership. Unfamiliarity with partnership and family structure can work against their participation in their child's education (Haines et al., 2013, p. 31). These "facilitating factors at home" along with a family's "willingness to participate and their respect for teachers" can play a large part in an individual child's success (Hindman, Miller, Froyen & Skibbe, 2012; Lamb-Parker, Piotrkowski, Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Clark & Peay, 2001, p. 37).

ECEPs need different types of knowledge, skills and strategies to enable them to work more successfully with the complex needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, parents and families. ECEPs need to be further trained in how to use effective intervention practices, informed by the research (Dunst & Trivette, 2009b), to effectively support the complexities some families face. The strategies and methods implemented to train ECEPs in effective intervention practices is critically important and using an evidence-based approach to professional development is key to the successful adoption of this important learning. The effectiveness of four adult learning methods (accelerated learning, coaching, guided design, and just-in-time training) constituted the focus of a meta-analysis study (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2010). The PALS (Participatory Adult Learning Strategy) developed from this study

is an effective evidence based approach to support positive learning outcomes of different practices in early childhood education and care environments. The approach "places major emphasis on both active learner involvement in all aspects of training opportunities and instructor/trainer-guided learner experiences. The use of PALS practices has been found to be associated with improved learner knowledge, use, and mastery of different types of intervention practices" (Dunst & Trivette, 2009b).

An important key to success in this work is based on the values that educators and professionals convey in their work, which must demonstrate, "principles such as empathy, respect, genuineness, optimism and partnership" (Whittaker, Hazel, Oppenheimer, Technow, Young & Franklin, 1990; Davis, Day & Bidmead, 2002; Scott, 2009). Seeking the everyday experiences and feelings, beliefs and attitudes of families and children who are part of ECEC programs and their understandings of this experience, this research hopes to support education as a platform to support the growth and development of children and the participations of families in their child's education.

Risk factors within the peer domain can include such things as:

> rebelliousness, early initiation of problem behaviour, antisocial behaviour, favourable attitudes toward antisocial behaviour, favourable attitudes toward drug use, perceived risks of drug use, and interaction with antisocial peers, friends use of drugs, sensation seeking, rewards for antisocial involvement, and gang involvement. (Cahir, Davies, Deany, Tange, Toumbourou, Williams & Rosicka, 2003, p. 14)

From an early years' vantage point many of these behaviours can be avoided by initiating social and emotional protective factors to provide a better influence for children and the families who might be in a situation or lifestyle that might further impact their vulnerability and disadvantage. This process of engineering towards positive behaviours for children begins by teaching the positive dispositions that may lead them away from these anti-social or illegal behaviours and by placing them in a wide variety of diverse contexts which can be seen as advantageous thereby harnessing protective factors for the child. From the perspective of vulnerable and disadvantaged families, who might be experiencing any of these at risk behaviours, it is both important to provide a safe harbour for the child and Child Protection and Prevention services where necessary. This research study looks at ideas around encouraging family engagement, teaching attitudinal values, and supporting and guiding families in their goals for their children. A shared vision is an important facilitator of greater

collaboration and can enhance coordination between services and agencies (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), *Inverting the Pyramid*, 2009). In response:

> the move towards a public health model of child protection requires more than the traditional statutory response and requires services to work across the boundaries that have traditionally separated them in order to achieve a population-level impact and maximise the potential for prevention. (Gibson, Francis, McDougall, Arney, Grauwelman-Smith & Parkinson, 2015, p. 17)

It is the hope that encouraging and engaging families will also have a positive effect on their everyday lives, that they might experience positive relationships with ECEPs and other families who might be experiencing similar difficulties to themselves, which gives them a feeling of inclusion and belonging and reduces their fears and feelings of isolation and being misunderstood or judged.

Protective factors which give children foundational understandings and, nurture social and emotional skills, if not part of their everyday environment, may be engineered through natural processes such as involvement in their ECEC setting assisting in making their journey more positive from pre-school through to adulthood. These natural processes are thought to include, "opportunities of pro-social development, rewards for pro-social involvement, family attachment, social skills, belief in the moral order" (Cahir et al., 2003, pp. 14-15). A child's family context can have positive or adverse effects on their protective factors or resilience, which can provide these foundational needs of nurture, care, security and trust in relationships. Resiliency and protective factors influence the disposition of children to learning, which is supported by authentic relationships through ECECs adopting a key-person or adopting a key-worker model. Effective educational engagement can inculcate positive values and attitudes. An example of such engagement is the Strengthening Families Initiative (SFI). This is an evidence-informed prevention initiative designed to support a wide range of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in early childhood education and care services. SFI has been developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy and operates from a strength-based perspective, focusing on cultivating resiliency within families. SFI provides early childhood education and care services with a framework for fostering five protective factors: child development and child socio-emotional competence, knowledge of parenting, parental resilience, social connections, and, concrete support in times of need. The

empirical evidence emerging suggests that SFI improves the quality of early years services provided to children and improves the quality of training provided to staff (Mortensen, 2015).

Children (like all people) need to feel a sense of belonging, somewhere in their life, whether at home, in the neighbourhood and/or at the ECEC setting. This is true for the families whose children attend ECEC services and magnified if the family is vulnerable or disadvantaged. Feeling a sense of inclusion and belonging can be created by naturally or engineered programs, groups or opportunities for families to engage in positive relationships with their peers/other families or with the ECEPs themselves. This can also be a safety net for the family and may include outreach programs. Bowes, Grace and Hodge (2012) look at the, "social foundation of behaviours that relate to resilience, adaptability to benefit from the available supports" (p. 291). Hodge (2012) adds that learning outcomes rely on effectiveness, empowerment and consequence. These notions work around such things as voice/s being heard, including families in decision-making, letting children grow in their own understandings of the world about them, and their life-world. These are empowering and guide people's understandings about responsibility, consequence of actions and the importance of reflection (Shier, 2001). The acquisition of social competence involves cognitive success, meaningful participation in activities both with and without others, and developing a sense of self (Roy, 1972; Garmezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984). Continuous improvement in learning involves progression, development and reflection (Tickell, 2011). Part of child development involves having the time and space to respond to challenges. To develop social and emotional competence children need inclusion, relationships and personalisation in an authentic, relevant and engaging environment (Hodge, 2012). These qualities are engendered via processes rather than just single opportunities.

It is essential to raise the motivation and self-esteem of children in the face of a "vicious cycle of under expectation" (Mittler, 2000, p. 61). As, "children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others learning … they recognise their agency, capacity to initiative and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them" (Australian Government, *AEYLF*, 2013, p. 9). This accords with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1979). Behaviour while often seen as negative, affects everything we do in relation with others (Mathieson & Raban-Bisby, 2013). With support, children begin to regulate their own emotions and communicate their needs in ways that are respectful to other people's feelings (DEEWR, VEYLDF, 2009).

Relationships and Partnerships

Best practice, "begins with an empathetic understanding of children and families [but] when families enter into the early years … a mistrust of services and feelings of being judged are barriers many families feel" (Sims, Hayden, Palmer & Hutchins, 2000, p. 46). In fact, "some families who might have experienced trauma or stressors … have had little reason to trust any other human being and this needed to be overcome if they were to establish a partnership which benefited the children" (Sims et al., 2000, p. 43). There is a need to establish or re-establish this trust within long-term familiar relationships, but without time and equal partnership, and understanding where the family is at, there will always be this gap in involving families in their child's education which might result in a child not realising their full potential.

The Centre for Community Child Health (2010) noted that there are structural or service level barriers, family level barriers, and, "sometimes survival needs take priority over attendance at a service" (p. 2). Family stressors can be complicated, complex and numerous. Everyday experiences can generate difficulties accessing ECEC services for basic reasons such as transport and money. It is for this reason that the family is so important in this study because the family or caregiver is so important and influential on the child who is the focal point of all efforts. Other relational and interpersonal barriers occur around:

> perceptions, beliefs, values and attitudes and insensitivities to culture, judgemental and unsupportive attitudes, and for families feelings of mistrust, difficulties in dealing with their support agent, and perceived attitudes of staff. It is also essential that staff have the necessary capacity, skills, time and resources for engaging parents. (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin & Berry, 2012, p. 2062)

The relationship between educator and child is absolutely important and can create foundational protective factors that are valuable for children that will help them in their journey of life that can exist with, and or in conjunction with family resilience, and if a child is vulnerable the educator can play this part in a child's life-world:

> educators can promote children's understanding of emotions by creating warm, secure and responsive environments, where children are encouraged to discuss their feelings and where there are opportunities to express feelings in appropriate ways—such as through drawing, writing, talking, music and movement. (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 83)

Showing children positive emotional responses such as empathy that can give them feelings of trust and safety, builds the foundational security needed for long-term emotional and relational development that will help them improve socially in life. This is a deliberate feature of this research study to look into the emotional and social development of the child rather than focussing on a child's other cognitive needs and skills.

This study concurs with the view of the primacy of "relationship-based principles … [and] practice which are founded on empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 1). These can become part of learning effective social skills and assist in the development of relationships with others. This requires attitudes that are learnt, predispositions to react in a consistent manner towards certain people, events, objects, and/or concepts. Attitudes have "cognitive, emotional and behavioural components" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 23). Teaching positive attitudes and building upon these is not only useful, but imperative for children and families in need, as their previous experiences might mean they are vulnerable. Teaching attitudes than can affect behaviour means that through awareness of their responses to their perceptions and in acknowledging these as perhaps feelings, rather than the reality of the situation, can potentially solve the vicious circle of marginalisation in some cases. People who feel marginalised react or respond in ways, due to these feelings, that appear as communication breakdowns which can perpetuate negative situations. My research sees good relationships and partnerships as essential. This relies on the empathetic ability to see through the eyes of others. Educators are exhorted to, "see children's learning as integrated and interconnected.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2013) expects that families will be welcomed and respected in ECEC settings, and actively encouraged to participate in curriculum decisions. It looks at honesty in relationships and partnerships between ECEPs and families, respect for each other's knowledge and contribution involving the child, to engender trust in one another, to communicate openly and to share in the decision-making of the child. Tayler (2006) comments that positive partnerships are based on open and respectful communication that fosters shared decision-making. Underpinning this is the concept that power should be shared between stakeholders such as ECEPs and the vulnerable and disadvantaged families with whom they work. There may be an expectation that family disadvantage can mean that a child is held back by their perceived deficits but this should be countered by a deliberate attempt to alleviate this inequality by recognising the importance of social engagement. Rawolle and Lingard (2013) explain that Bourdieu, "recognised the

relational workings of the social arrangement, seeing all social phenomenon in relation to their location in a given field and in relation to others in the field" (p. 118). Who we are in relationship with others is affected by, the "workings of power in social and cultural reproduction" (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p. 119). Recognising and addressing the power implicit in relationships is essential in forming respectful, collaborative partnerships.

Children and families can still be subject to the deficits or strengths that exists in their culture and/or context. Education should be an equalising factor that allows the child to succeed not only in terms of economic value but also in happiness and wellbeing. In education, teaching life skills, self-efficacy and compassion for others needs to be part of the process of learning alongside cognitive and skill development in areas such as literacy and numeracy. Education should teach us about who we are and how to interact successfully with others. The social aspects of education and the acquisition of this cultural capital of happiness, health and wellbeing is the true power factor for children.

To ensure this value-base is part of everyday practice means that transparency and accountability must occur at all times in all aspects of ECEC services. An empowering model is more appropriate than a deficit model as it encourages and allows voice or voice/s to be heard, for parents to have a say in their child's education. This empowerment approach serves the early years process in many ways. It engages and allows for participation of families and it teaches children to learn such resilient skills as independent thinking, good communication skills, a desire for high expectations and to try to discover its invisible dynamics. This invisibility may be present in all groups although the dynamics may differ. This research seeks the invisibility to understand what interplay of relationships, values, and resources, are effecting participants.

Parents are encouraged to, "become involved in their children's education at school and in the community" (Olsen & Fuller, 2008, p. 160). Families are the key to childhood success and educators can play a strong part in assisting families in the support of their child's educational needs. This research study focuses specifically on individual themes such as how relationships occur in a range of ways. Relationship building is part of a scaffolding process when educators work with a child's learning experience and pay careful attention to using communication which is empowering and fosters openness and trust between children, families and ECEPs. The parent-child relationship is a critical protective factor in the development and wellbeing of all children. It is important to understand what motivates

families around their child's education and to support them to adapt, change and develop new skills. The ECEPs ability to establish a positive non-judgemental relationship with all children and parents was seen as critical along with providing a safe, non-stigmatising, responsive service to those who may otherwise be disconnected from education and support.

The notion of parallel processes means that all relationships are impacted by the way they are enhanced or undermined (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Moore, 2006, 2007; Mothersole, 1999; Pawl, 1984; Pawl & St. John, 1998). This relationship approach aligns with qualitative methodology as a person's experience is affected by their inner world, experiences, beliefs, emotions and behaviour (Gowen & Nebrig, 2001). Irrespective of circumstances an, "assets approach emphasises parents' right … to shape their child's early education and life experiences. In contrast, a deficits approach identifies what parents lack and tries to fill the gap" (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2011, p. 79). Relationship building can occur via the voices and perspectives garnered through "little narratives" or ''petit recits" (Lyotard, 1984) between stakeholders that include experts and non-experts who become co-constructors of knowledge (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2011). These small narratives occur in this research through the interviews with ECEPs and families identifying their everyday lived experience in the ECEC setting. Families are not bound by the same constraints as ECEPs and it is important to seek out their shared understandings and experiences (Southcott & Cosaitis, 2015). These can be identified as themes about social inclusion, access, participation and engagement of ECEPs and vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

Positive relationships can be linked to wellbeing and given the time and correct attitudes alongside values that are enriching and supportive, children can gain a sense of self that can be nurtured and strengthened. When ECEPs, "treated parents as capable decision makers who knew their child's strengths and needs but may also desire support at times" (Peck, 2015, p. 175) it was suggested that ECEPs "thought those acts contributed to families' trust in them and thought families were more willing to partner with them ... [and] felt connected to their families and perceived that parents felt understood by them" (Peck, 2015, p. 175). Gaining trust is seen as an enabler. Sims, Hayden, Palmer and Hutchins (2000) state that the aim of a key person model is, "to resurrect children's trust in adults by having one key person as the initial attachment figure ... and to use the same relief staff at all times to facilitate a sense of security and trust" (p. 43). All human beings have similar needs for survival, for growth, for learning and to thrive as individuals within their culture or community and the need for belonging correlates. There are six main features of positive

staff-parent partnerships, "communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect … [and] partnership requires equality or reciprocity between families and service providers" (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2011, p. 189). Human beings are part of groups, families, clans, cultures and communities and they all involve relationships with others (Peck, 2015, p. 175). Partnership building is around relationships and "practitioners need to build trust which works better with familiarity, but they needed both time and training for this to work effectively" (Axford et al., 2012, p. 2069). This represents another gap in current literature and findings.

Collaborative Partnerships

There is considerable agreement in the literature on what works and what does not work in interagency partnership and collaboration and building capacity within the early years service system to further support vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families with multiple and complex needs (Scott, 2010). Barriers to collaboration might include difficulties in management or leadership, commitment to staff training and improvement, organisational difficulties, philosophies and ideologies or cultures in a work setting and information sharing. Enablers include strategies and vision, and specific understanding of roles and sharing from all levels, good leadership, integrity and trust between partnerships. Working together, change in values, alongside practical responses, is necessary and is usually categorised as policy and practice, organisational and service, for children and their families and education/schooling (Flanagan & Hancock, 2010). A stakeholder is, "defined here in positive terms as a key partner that has a stake in the vulnerable child's life, which ideally seeks to prosper that child's experience or success" (Roberts, 2015, p. 2). Adopting a partnership approach across service delivery and design and interagency support can enhance the greatest outcomes for children and their families who are at risk. Partnerships also require vision, clear strategy, and positive leadership (Chadwick Center, 2004; Cockburn, 2004; Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate & Kyriakidou, 2004; Plsek, 2003) and organisations and approaches that are adaptable (Schorr, 2003).

With the many varied and complex problems and barriers for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families, Scott (2010, p. 24) notes that, "collaborative practices and joined up approaches across sectors, services and professionals is critical". Flexible cross-institutional programs, services and outreach programs can work well to assist vulnerable families and their children in partaking in ECEC services. A well-informed ECEP can be supportive towards enabling all aspects of the early childhood experience with sensitive and

collaborative practices, understanding of pathways and quality frameworks, assistance with outreach, and meeting of family needs. Implementing collaborative practice at the coalface is critical. Harnessing the knowledge, experience and skills of ECEP's empowers the partnership of all team members to utilise their strengths fully to meet the goals of ECEPs, children and their families during this important place and space in their lives (Roberts, 2015).

From the ECEPs' perspective it is essential that flexible and relationship-based collaboration, integration, facilitated and coordinated pathway programs that include outreach can enable efficacious ECEC experiences. Access to ECEC programs may encounter many barriers, such as access to transport and financial resources. Participation in programs is enabled by the generation and delivery of better services located in a place where families felt safe and empowered, non-judged by the community, and supported by quality frameworks (Roberts, 2015, p. 53). A key worker approach to family-centred practice aligned with sensitivity to a family's culture or customs enables engagement. Partnerships and collaborative practices build capacity alongside professional development, to enhance best practice models and frameworks, seeking to deal with issues of lack of time and resources, and encouraging inclusion (Roberts, 2015).

Collaborative models are part of what Sanders and Stappers (2008) refer to when using the term co-creation as "any act of collective creativity" (Steen, Manschot & Koning, 2011, Introduction). The act of sharing builds connection, "collaboration itself, is not the goal" (Wong, Press, Sumison & Hard, 2012, p. 4) but is a key and dynamic aspect within relationships" and, "should be transformational, responsive to community needs and guided by clear goals, values and mission to bring people together in common purpose" (Wong et al., p. 4). This occurs between educators developing partnerships and enablers include having, "time to build and maintain collaboration.... A focus on good quality relationships, mutual respect, trust and effective communication. Co-location can afford frequency of staff contact and build staff trust" (Wong et al., 2012, p. 4). Models that are based around community participation in areas with small resource capacity (Lamb-Parker, Greenfield, Fantuzzo, Clark & Coolahan, 2000; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005) can result in local capacity building, creating ownership, thus ensuring increased accountability, fostering community strength, and cohesion by adopting common goals, and empowering people to make their own decisions for themselves and their children (Casper & Lamb-Parker, 2012, p. 188). Collaboration is about relationship-building and this creates meaning, a sense of ownership over resources, loyalty, empowerment and belonging. Co-creation is about shared meaning-making.

According to Wong et al. (2012) collaborative practice is not a goal but an outcome that occurs as the result of transformative, responsive, shared engagement in a common purpose. Bringing people together for a common purpose, in a shared time and space aligns with EYLF best practice that engender feelings of being, belonging and becoming. Collaboration can occur with children and their families, at the ECEC setting, at parent groups, and so forth. What is required is a trusted environment where challenges and concerns can be discussed. Collaboration is not just service oriented and does not only include inter-sector collaboration but collaboration and partnerships between all individuals coming together in groups. This process can bring more meaning to the experience through being shared.

For ECEPs to collaborate effectively and efficiently within their own services or with other services they need "time, formal agreements, appropriately qualified and/or skilled staff and planning [and] flexibility" (Wong et al., 2012, p. 4). Throughout this study I look at the need for further professional development and training and the need for well skilled and experienced mentors and leaders who are successful in their ability to communicate and are well informed about referral pathways, able to take on a role of advocacy, and know the system well. Mentors should also have extensive experience dealing with families and their children and have an empathetic understanding of those living with disadvantage and vulnerability. When workers come together to share in their role around a case/child/family it is thought that better outcomes can be achieved. Realistically there is a lot of red tape around privacy and confidentiality which means that often ECEPs may be unaware of the situations and difficulties the children and families might be facing. Collaborative practice is enabled by effective leadership, management and professional development. There needs to be time to build and maintain collaborative relationships that rely on, "mutual respect, trust and effective communication. Collaboration can create feelings of loyalty within a project, program or group, particularly when stakeholders are responsible for the creation, development and implementation. Sanders and Stappers (2008) used the term "co-creation" in reference to creativity that is shared by two or more people, while using the term "co-design" in a more narrow sense to refer to collective creativity. Steen et al (2011, Introduction) expanded on that definition referring to "collective creativity as it is applied across the whole span of a design process ... on creative cooperation during design processes—rather than on the co-creation, which also refers to creative cooperation during service delivery and usage".

Community-based activities, projects or groups work successfully in areas where there is a shortage of resources (Lamb-Parker et al., 2000, Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005). Bringing people together in:

> effective cooperation and coordination is the hallmark of good teamwork. High mutual assistance, low discord and timely communication and feedback all contribute towards effective cooperation and coordination. Cooperation and coordination assist [*crew]* to function effectively, make decisions and mitigate problems as they arise. (IATA, [n.d.], p. 47)

Mutual assistance, while not discussed much in ECEC literature is on a par with a partnership and collaborative approach when two parties come together to work toward a particular goal. In this way ECEPs and parents can leave behind the role of the expert and novice to bring to the fore one another's expertise in and around the development of the child. Such, "Co-design changes the way practitioners [ECEPs] conceptualise and approach *vulnerability* in the pursuit of social change [and] may underestimate the degree to which people can determine visions for their own wellbeing and participate in decision-making processes" (Brown & Wyatt, 2010, p. 8). As people create, direct, and participate in projects that they feel are their own and can simultaneously be shared with others collaboration works well. It's not just in the outcome but in the success of sharing together in a process; the enjoyment, participation and engagement in the everyday, giving people an opportunity to grow and develop in their own self-identity, skills and place in the world. This relationship-based approach is what makes stakeholders feel successful in these everyday projects, programs or groups, especially when the experience is shared between people who have common ground or share similar interests. When this social experience is positive it can have great impacts for all those involved. Should an individual, family, or ECEP experience feelings of shame, judgement, inferiority, exclusion, marginalisation and isolation, this can have a potentially catastrophic impact on the feelings and attitudes of the individual or group experiencing these negative impacts and can affect future behaviour or willingness to trust or be involved in such programs or groups. Creating situations, places and spaces that seek to include and encourage engagement needs to take place because these negative experiences whether perceived or otherwise can have long-term negative repercussions and be synergistic in barriers for those who feel estranged from the community.

Attitudinal understandings might be difficult for early years success as it revolves around the notion of perceptions. This can be difficult to ascertain as what people perceive may or may not be the truth but this is relevant and real in any kind of social exchange. Families often report feeling judged. The relationship between a child and their family, as well as the relationship between the child, the family and the service, is extremely important and influential (Bocknek, Brophy-Herb & Banerjee, 2009; Cole, Teti & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Cole, Martin & Dennis, 2004; Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Ispa, Fine, Halgunseth, Harper, Robingson, Boyce & Brady-Smith, 2004; Kim & Kochanska, 2012; Hazel, 2014).

When looking at collaborative and partnership-based models in education, the Communities of Practice social learning model (Wenger, 2008) is useful. Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) apply this model to discuss collaborative learning in cohort sessions in professional development that brings together experienced and novice teachers with different levels of qualifications in a "third space that is community-specific rather than hierarchical" (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011, p. 72). In this understanding a community of practice is intentionally formed, which involves mutual engagement, joint enterprise and builds a shared repertoire. It involves explicit learning processes and builds identity. In this third space it is about, "resource sharing, affirming, and problem solving" (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011, p. 69). This peer, mentoring and leadership approach can build on the knowledge around training and professional development needs, in a way that allows for the creation of understanding and discussion about thoughts, ideologies, values, planning and practice and makes best use of the teaching experience being shared with others in the field and is a best-practice model for teachers to learn and engage.

Communication at its Best

While there has only been a small amount of research done on communication approaches and styles within the ECEC settings and especially between families and ECEPs this research proposes that the key behind positive communication is not necessarily a skill but an attitude. Beginning with a value-based approach, true, honest and sincere communication comes when such values as acceptance, empathy, caring, and nurturing sit with the communicator with the hope that the other is sharing in this relationship and its positive regard. So it is the value behind each word that is what is truly effective.

MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) identify communication styles that can negate the relationship experience, such as privileging, essentialising, homogenising, othering and silencing. Whereas positive communication styles actively encourage people to express their views in a welcoming and honest space and relationship. Effective communication is built on honest relationships and shared decision-making. Not just ECEPs, but families might need to be taught, learn or be guided in the necessary skills or attitudes that can be expressed and shared through words and language. This thought, while outside the scope of this study, is seen as possible future research relating to engaging families. Negative communication can occur in many ways, "communication that is one-way ... implies that other people's views are not wanted and/or are irrelevant" (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2011, p. 179). Positive communication should value the ideas and views of all, regard differences in opinions as normal, and accept ideas outside the mainstream. Parents are always involved in education but they may be silent, passive, vocal or active partners.

Teachers need to be skilled in both communication and child development. Language is powerful and the way it is used can result in positive or negative judgements (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gubrium & Holstein, 1993; Eisikovitz & Buchbinder, 1996). The selection of, "words used can either perpetuate social exclusion or promote positive values" (UNICEF, 2007, p. 1). Also, "parental communication is one of the key ways in which the family can act as a protective health asset, promoting pro-social values that equip young people to deal with stressful situations or buffer them against adverse influences" (World Health Organisation WHO, 2009/10, p. 19). In working with children and their families, ECEPs need upskilling to work more effectively with adults. This is a new dimension in the ECEC sector that adds the dynamic of enhanced family engagement. Supportive, value-based communication needs to be researched further to investigate what works and what does not work well. The lack of information on this subject is a concern. This study is working from this value-based perspective but does not deny the fact that some ECEPs might need to learn and be trained in developing appropriate and responsive attitudes and communication within their relationships with families and with other ECEPs so that these values might be further modelled in ECEC settings.

The power/deficit model is linked to communication. Despite only recently becoming tenuously understood, it acknowledges that words can show or present an attitude, feeling or perception whether felt or not or real or imagined. Language used, and attitudes to those who are marginalised represent what is called, "characteristics of the cultural deficit model" which

stem from negative beliefs and assumptions regarding the ability, aspirations, and work ethic of systematically marginalised peoples (Irizarry, 2009). The deficit perspective is influential (Irizarry, 2009) but alternatives include the power perspective that involves families in decision-making and treats them as valuable contributors to the knowledge and needs of their child and their own motivations regarding their child's best outcomes. It is essential that no party has more influence or power over the other but that they support each other to meet rich and rewarding outcomes for the child. It is necessary to observe from a place of understanding not judgement, guiding not being authoritarian or controlling, partnering not coming from the expert position. If we do this we hear the voice of children and their families, we advocate when necessary, we are open to see the good in relationships, and aim to be empathetic in attitudes toward those with whom we may or may not naturally share the same values and experiences. Empathy and trust sits between power and deficit. Successful communication is an enabler.

Slee (2005, p. 158) notes that language can perpetuate, "questions of power and powerlessness" that can result from language being used within a power/deficit model. Language can define through its tone or implications and can include or marginalise people. Conversations between children and adults, "provide many informal opportunities for children to develop understanding … [and] often the most enlightening conversations develop from child initiations and interests" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 334). Throughout the day ECEPs engage in many conversations—with individuals, small groups, large groups or a whole class group (Arthur et al., 2015). The invisibility within relationships can sometimes occur through non-verbal communication, how someone phrases a word, or glances in a direction, sits, or makes gestures. Social expressions and/or perceptions can be a kind of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1991). It is my belief that when the value-base behind the relationship or the communication is one of empathy, trust, acceptance, respect and understanding that these non-verbal cues will reflect this positive nature and indicate a true and honest relationship. Partnerships with parents, which involve, "programs which combine parental support and child stimulation show stronger impact" and using a, "notion of a common language for both parents and professionals" (Pretis, 2011 p. 75) can bring people together.

Cultural Perspectives

Families can at times inhabit complex contexts and the school environment, the role of government, voluntary agencies and communities can be assistive in ensuring positive life

learning for all children. Sensitivity to cultural diversity and a family's context, the positive attitude of ECEPs toward children and families, strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, all assist in enabling ECEPs when working with vulnerable families, and particularly those with cultural issues. Culturally responsive teaching involves linguistic attention, empathic emotional involvement, advocacy, an understanding of the histories of children and families, and is underpinned by a good relationship built on a strengths-based approach (L. Cox, 2000).

Australia is an aspirationally inclusive multicultural society encouraging beliefs of "tolerance, acceptance of difference … [and] creating a sense of belonging" for all children (Cohrssen, Church & Tayler, 2011, p. 14). Community is, "more than just a location, or a collection of individuals who happen to live or work in the same place" and "having a sense of community refers to the quality of relationships and connections that bind people together" (Touhill, 2012, p. 1). Many of the families in this study have had the experience of being refugees, which adds to the need for tolerance, acceptance and patience. Refugee and migrant beliefs toward education may be different from societal beliefs of education in countries of orgin (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Hwa-Froelisch & Westby, 2003; Day & Parlakian, 2004; Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006, Tadesse, Hoot & Watson-Thompson, 2009). Good communication and relationships between families and ECEPs may be assistive. ECEPs who are sensitive to cultural diversity and families' contexts, model and express empathy, and are, "accepting of, and responsive to a family's culture" (Peck, 2015, p. 175). The importance of empathy in culturally responsive teaching is interspersed throughout the urban and multicultural education literature (Warren, 2014, p. 575). Understanding someone through their eyes can create an honest feeling of trust and respect. To respond culturally is to be sensitive and focus on having empathy towards and solidarity with those of other cultures. This approach involves the, "development of three aspects: cultural awareness, cultural values, and cultural skills" (Freund, 2015, p. 2).

Being multi-culturally competent requires specific skills within the area of culture (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeier & Zenk, 1994). Knowledge, understanding, acceptance, and sensitivity are prerequisites for professional social work that involves cultural and human diversity (Chau, 1990). Brown and Johnson (2015, p. 2) argue that, even with a correct values-based approach to culture, "it is still necessary to have the adequate skills and confidence in working in multicultural classroom settings". The way people behave socially is both cultural and emotional, and growth occurs when the individual develops by learning to

determine and make choices over their feelings (Linke, 2009). Through learning, emotional maturity acts as a protective factor, which can and must be taught and guided through a scaffolding process by ECEPs with children especially if a child's environment means that the capacity for this to occur at home might be impaired. It is arguably the role of the ECEPs to provide this in an ECEC setting. Here there is a blurring of the lines between social work and ECEPs work. To do this, ECEPs can encourage, support and empathise within a child's context to better understand the child and to be able to assist in the child's growth and development. All people are part of a social world and to have a prosperous and bountiful social world means that children and their families must feel safe and secure so that they can be willing, free and open to share their needs, motivations, and/or grievances in their lives that might be impacting on their child's needs. ECEPs need to have the knowledge, capacity and time to be able to build such relationships based around trust, empathy and values of acceptance, respect and understanding.

Teaching, Learning and Play

The basis of ECEC begins with the notion of play and comes with a myriad of purposes and processes behind which appears a simple notion. In the process of play is a context for learning which, "allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness, enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity, enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning, assists children to develop relationships and concepts, [and] stimulates a sense of wellbeing" (Australian Government, EYLF, 2013, p. 9). In the expression and process of play the ECEP can guide such activities to express particular values and ideologies, such as, social inclusion, diversity, fairness, cultural sensitivity and equality deliberately, with the hope that a child might begin to understand these concepts.

> Play, along with other forms of active learning is normally a natural point of access to the curriculum for each child at his or her particular stage and level of understanding. It is therefore an essential force in making equal opportunities in learning, intrinsic as it is to all areas of development. (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. viii)

Particularly when children are emotionally competent, harmonious ECEC environments eventuate because of children having attained the ability to regulate their emotions (Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012) a factor that is critical for their social and cognitive learning.

Play-based programs, which develop imagination through play, allowing children to practice the movement of stepping between the real and imagined as discussed by Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010 are the key to children classifying and forming ideas about the nature of things in the world through play; developing "their thinking in this playworld" (Lindqvist, 1995). Play is an important part of the pedagogy of ECECs.

Early Childhood Intervention

In the field there is much confusion about early childhood intervention as it relates to intervention for children with disabilities, developmental delay and or vulnerabilities and disadvantage. In the Victorian Government definition of vulnerability used in this study those children and families affected by disability are included.

Vulnerable children are at risk of having poor behavioural and cognitive outcomes in their early years of life, which makes them more vulnerable to low educational achievement at school and poor physical and mental health as young adults. Early childhood intervention is critical to support the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of vulnerable children, particularly in the first three years of their life and has an important influence on the child's long-term wellbeing. This time can be either a powerful window of opportunity for development or an ineffective window for developmental delay. Such developmental delays can result in poor physical skills such as fine and gross motor control and language skills that hinders the acquisition of literacy and numeracy when the child starts school (Willms 2002). The provision of early childhood intervention to support children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage during the early years, is recognised as crucial to increasing parental competence and reducing the social and environmental risks to vulnerable children's development (Heckman 2006).

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children who attend Early Intervention Programs before school commencement, gain benefits in the area of physical health, social, emotional, cognitive development and attainment of skills in mathematics and reading (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). Evaluation of The Early Head Start Program identified that children attending the program had increased secure attachment relationships and better health and nutrition outcomes than other children and were more likely to be immunized and less likely to attend medical services for injuries and accidents. (Raikes, Green, Atwater, Kisker, Constantine, & Chazan-Cohen, 2006).

Enhancing the educational well being of children at risk, such as with issues of child maltreatment and biological birth risks, homelessness, poverty and low-maternal education "requires intentional, systematic, and comprehensive interventions that can only be achieved through collaborations between early childhood educators and other social service systems" such as child and family welfare agencies (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009, p. 1). ECEC's who develop collaborative partnerships with other welfare agencies can better support children at risk and thereby increase access to resources and expertise that are specifically designed for children experiencing social and biological risk factors.

Without intervention at risk children may fall behind in crucial learning and this can have an ongoing negative synergistic effect throughout the child's school life, both socially and cognitively. Whereas family resilience can be based on values, attitudes and behavioural dimensions and when children and their families are at risk, the role of schools becomes increasingly important (Hawley & De Hann, 1996). Benard (1991) noted that if the major risks for a child lie within the family, protective factors may be located in school and community environments and by enabling change—is to engage and teach families a "set of skills that help parents change the way that they look at situations" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 32).

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) as it relates to children with disability and/or developmental delay, provides specialised support for children, families, fostering the child's development, well-being, and active participation in their broader community as well as their ECEC setting. In support of this notion, Bruder (2010), and Dunst (2007), identify ECI practitioners (members of the ECEP group in this study) as, "working in partnership with parents/caregivers, families and other significant stakeholders to enhance their knowledge, skills and supports to meet the needs of the child, optimise the child's learning and development, and the child's ability to participate in family and community life (Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA), 2016)."

Moore, (2012), states that:

> the overall aim of ECI is to ensure that the parents or other key caregivers are able to provide young children who have disability and/or developmental delay with experiences and opportunities that promote the children's acquisition and use of competencies which enable the children to participate meaningfully in the key environments in their lives. (Moore, 2012)

Interventions can support transition.

Transition Model

Engaging families in their child's education will aid in supporting a child's lifelong learning and development. Crucial in this process is a successful transition into schooling. In the early years if children do not transition well they can be affected by low outcomes in later life (McClelland, Acock & Morrison, 2006; Ryan, Fauth & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). The aim of successful transition is to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage with the many opportunities offered by their new learning environment. To typify early years' readiness for school it is necessary for the child to have, "physical wellbeing and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning communication and language usage, and cognition and general knowledge" (Pianta, Cox & Snow, 1997, p. 197). Pre-school teachers have noted that, "the school readiness gap between children who come to school is based on sociocultural factors" (Deiner, 2010, p. 89). To improve the transition from ECEC it is necessary for communities to work together in partnership to create learning environments and opportunities that are responsive to individual children and their families. Continuity and particularly transitions are important in the early years and can occur through a set of constructs and experiences absorbed by the individual. These are not sedative but rather they work together and are responsive to the environments in which they are a part. As Sanders, White, Burge, Sharp, Eames, McEune and Grayson (2005) state, "The process of transition may be viewed as one of adaptation. This study has shown that the best adaptation takes place where conditions are similar, communication is encouraged, and the process of change takes place gradually over time" (p. 9).

There are varied development stages, phases and ECEC contexts for learning in Australia between home and playgroup/childcare, playgroup/childcare and pre-school, and pre-school into school. Siraj-Blatchford (2009b) identified that we should provide individual children with the "lived experience of smooth transition and continuity in their learning across these phases and contexts". ECEPs working with children from birth to eight years should be encouraged to foster that continuity by providing familiar play-based activities, such as sand and water play, role play, construction, as well as known routines, in concert with learning and new experiences. Margetts (2003) notes that children from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and children with special needs find transitions more difficult than other children.

Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell (2002), in interviewing ECEPs in the EPPE case studies found that these practitioners were concerned that incorrect assumptions were made in relation to chronological age and the child's level of development; it highlighted for them that children need different pedagogical approaches not tied to age.

The concept of "transition" in the past may have been viewed as solely "school readiness" however, Kagan & Neuman, (1998), see transition in terms of pedagogical progression connecting each phase of transition by using the familiar in previous programs while building and introducing new learning and approaches. "After investigating what has been learned from past research, [Kagan & Neuman] recommend a multipronged approach to promote continuity in children's early development and learning" (p. 365).

Early Learning Education as a Place, a Process, Experience and Context—A New Model Approach

Increasingly, more attention is being paid to combined early childhood and family support programs specifically targeted to support children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. These programs are early intervention focused and involve ECEPs visiting families' homes to provide emotional support, information relating to parenting and support with parenting practices and access to other services (Brookes, Summers, Thornburg, Ispa, & Lane, 2006; Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Parent education is being utilised more and more as an early intervention strategy, recognising the significant influence of the home environment on a child's development. The research tells us that developmental trajectories of a young child depends on the interaction between the characteristics of that child, their family and their economic and social environment (Edwards, Wise, Gray, Hayes, Katz, Mission, Patulny, & Muir, 2009). Early intervention programs focused on positively influencing the quality of parenting, can have long-term improved development outcomes for children are well evidenced in research. Further, supportive interactions between families and their children, often led to families being more likely to provide enriching activities for their children, less likely to engage in harsh discipline, and less likely to experience parental stress than other families. (Brookes et al., 2006; Raikes et al., 2006).

The CfC program was modelled on the successful Sure Start program (1999) that aimed to improve child poverty and child and family services (Edwards et al., 2009). The

National Evaluation of the Communities for Children (CfC) initiative, a contemporary Australian study, has indicated the sustainable positive benefits of implementing early childhood interventions focused on vulnerable children and their families. The study measured outcomes relating to the child around health, well-being, emotional and behavioural outcomes, physical and mental health and outcomes relating to parents around parenting practices, self-efficacy, self-confidence, relationship conflict, and parental employment status. It identified that the intervention program improved children's early receptive vocabulary and verbal ability, that parents in the CfC program were less likely to use hostile parenting, and mothers were more involved in community service activities (Edwards et al., 2009).

The early years is a time and place for all children including those who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, to be protected within a safe, special place where they have the time and space to come to terms with the sociocultural and educational experiences of their societies (Bennett, 1999; Mittler, 2000). Moore (2012) discusses how children can be affected by such things as their contexts, location, and support networks. Children and their families and ECEPs need a place (physical or otherwise) where they can be safe to share in their lives, reflect in their understandings, grow, learn, be nurtured and supported, and develop a sense of wellbeing. These are basic needs for all human beings. We are inherently social and need other human beings.

Cowen (1991) noted that wellness is both an ideal and exists along a continuum that encompasses competence, resilience, social system modification and empowerment. Children who, despite having grown up with stressors, successfully adapt, demonstrate self-actualisation and an ongoing ability to adapt to their environment (Benard, 1991), have a tendency toward social competence, problem solving and independence with a sense of purpose about the future. Personality traits of such successful children include being caring, supportive and affectionate, having healthy expectations, goal direction, persistence, hope, anticipation and coherence. A resilient family is able to adapt and prosper in the face of stress (Hawley & De Hann, 1996). Resiliency can also be based on values, attitudes and behavioural dimensions. A resilient child is apt at play, relationships, emotions and expectations (Benard, 1991). Education can be utilised, and understood as a form of social engineering that advances wellness. The school or ECEC environment is an effective place for proactive change (Cowen, 1991). As part of this process, the parents of the child have a vital role to play. Scott (2009) points out children's services should be parent-child centred and that there needs to be a shift at a critical mass for changes to occur.

Scott reflected on a model of "very high quality early childhood education and parenting education and support" developed to support and reach out to vulnerable families. A multidisciplinary team of ECEPs, "reached out to vulnerable families often collecting children from their homes and providing informal opportunities to build rapport with parents." Children were placed in:

> homegroups of five children with two caregivers to each group who were warm and consistent figures in the parents' lives as well as their children's lives. Many 'teachable moments' occurred every day which provided opportunities for enhancing responsive and sensitive parenting … Three decades later this same model is being recreated for very vulnerable children by the Children's Protection Society in Melbourne in its Early Years Research Project. (Scott, 2010, p. 45).

Trust, Empathy and Time—A New Dimension Involving Correlation Between Families and Community

Building collaborative approaches rely on having the time to develop trust and empathy. Time is a particular barrier to engaging hard-to-reach groups. In a key study around vulnerable children—Communities for Children—participants noted that the timeframe was not adequate to effectively engage hard-to-reach groups, given the time required to establish new services and partnerships (Cortis et al., 2009, p. 31). Additionally, it was noted that extra time was required to build familiarity, rapport and trust with vulnerable groups, including young mothers and Indigenous families. Together with time, "program design could present challenges to engaging hard-to-reach groups, with reflecting flexibility and adaptability imperative" (p. 32).

Although rarely focused on in early years literature, researchers have discussed the role of empathy in a relationship-based approach (Levenson & Ruef, 1992; Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette & Garcia, 1990; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Coke, Batson & McDavis, 1978; Hornstein, 1978; Lerner, 1980, Gerdes et al., 2010; Roger, 2012). Empathy is summarised as being, knowing and feeling, compassion, self-awareness. While:

> empathy enabled teachers to understand, to feel, to communicate with, and to respond to the needs of the children and families with whom they work. Empathy is a trait and skill necessary for teachers working with children and for partnering with families. (Peck, 2015, p. 176)

Ferguson (2003) comments that it is necessary that, "tools should improve the teacher's capacity to understand students from culturally accurate and appropriate points of view". Empathy is necessary to accomplish such a goal as it, "impacts teachers relationship building, student assessment, and the maintenance of a safe, trusting classroom environment" (Warren, 2014, p. 574). Researchers differ whether empathy can be taught (Peck, 2015) and learnt (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Training around being empathetic and communicating a feeling of trust needs to be further investigated for ECEPs. For both children and adults, trust is a large component of healing and nurture and is unable to be built hastily.

Community—Societal Influences in the Social World

While families may not have a set of specific rules and/or expectations and ideologies, there are common understandings and experiences that all families share, particularly when looking at ideological perspectives and culture, education, beliefs and values may differ and their environments can be diverse and complex.

To introduce this topic and explore it briefly looking into communities I shall now discuss the notion of norms or social facts that are somehow, "accepted in that group or community" (Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin & Southwood, 2015, p. 3.) Such norms include attitudes, awareness and acknowledgement of those attitudes and tools that can help people solve problems of coordination to facilitate mutually beneficial outcomes (Brennan et al., 2015). In society, "social pressure and norms involve observable behaviour" (p. 94). (Brennan et al., 2015, p. 94).

Change takes place through changes in our internal values and observable behaviour and having enough people in a group or cluster believing similarly. In this light this study seeks out community values and/or norms and the understandings of their thinking and opinions on ECECs and how the community feels they can enable this process for families and what they see as barriers to this process. and to find a fair process of exchange. This hopes to unearth the notion of invisibility that might exist in community values or norms and the silence that disadvantaged families might experience. It is thought to be a good stakeholder group as communities represent a large part of provision of services but more so the further inclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children in communities. Foucault talks about the "invisible observer … [and] seek[s] out this invisibility within community" (Murphy, 2013, p. 42).

Research highlights relationships as an essential aspect of community building. A community is more than a place or a location, it is the relationships and connections that people build together (Brown & Johnson, 2015). Norms or social facts that are accepted by a group or community are, "clusters of normative attitudes plus knowledge of those attitudes" (Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin & Southwood, 2015, p. 15). Norms, "facilitate our reaching mutually beneficial outcomes … as a cooperative-facilitating function" (Brennan et al., 2015, p. 35). Changing norms may involve social pressure and observable behaviour, which can be thought of as beneficial tools for cooperation. Recognising implicit and shared norms opens the opportunity to discuss invisibility, from a, "Foucaultian perspective" (Murphy, 2013). Community norms involve subjective rather than objective qualities, perceptions and values. People may experience very real negative feelings in response to such attitudes.

When a society is undergoing change and previously ordained values come into question this can cause a sense of distrust toward change and a crisis in community (Paxton 1999; Sennett 1998), as people grapple with their own ideologies of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair. Often these relationships are not necessarily about an exchange of equity, although it is thought this plays a large factor, but the acceptance of diversity with the challenges that past distrust can be heightened when the mainstream is expected to economically support these groups when their values as being participants in society may not align with these groups.

As these groups are able to, and willingly become, part of this social exchange the breakdown of prejudices can and does occur. Bourdieu (2011) considers this exchange to be social, economic and cultural. A society that sees itself as fair can have strong impact on prior attitudes and accepted norms. This active social contribution or social exchange is an impetus toward acceptance and inclusion within a community. Vulnerable communities may, like its individuals, be judged or excluded or marginalised due to financial or economic reasons (Sampson, Gridley, Turner & Fryer, 2010). Scourfield's (2006) discussion on the position of fathers in child protection is an example of how accepting help and engaging with services is affected deeply by society's norms and expectation. Similarly, service providers may also perceive fathers to be on the margins of family life and child protection practice.

McCurdy and Daro (2001), perceive, "social disorganisation" to contribute to unwillingness to engage with services, while social capital, which provides the neighbourhood with resources and environmental supports, improves parental engagement.

This is problematic because those rich in social capital may be more willing to consider early intervention services, "because the prevailing ethos in the area is one in which residents seek out and expect to use a broad array of formal supports" (McCurdy & Daro 2001, p. 116). They may also have better access to informal or non-service supports. These can include, extended families, friends, neighbours and so forth who are able to assist when they have needs. The informal and non-service supports might also be more willing to approach educational and social work services as they may expect these services to support them, if they are needed, because they may see themselves as contributing financially and socially to the system or community of which they are a part. Those families receiving welfare might experience guilt or lack of worth in needing support from services. Social factors impact, "on services for hard-to-reach families. Social norms and expectations, social disorganisation and poor social capital in a community can impede engagement, as can social and geographical isolation (and associated transport difficulties), the absence of a service network or initiative fatigue in a community" (Cortis et al., 2009, p. vi).

Concluding Remarks

As stated previously, "early childhood is a critical window of opportunity for creating virtuous cycles that help break intergenerational transmission of poverty" (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009, p. 44). It is a social, humanitarian and economic necessity to support early childhood education, care and wellbeing. All of these are part of an ecological model of the child within his or her immediate and broader family and community. Initially it was my intention that my research would focus primarily on social inclusion, access, participation and engagement from the frontline perspective surrounding vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children. With increasing investigation and from preliminary analyses further issues surfaced, these being family engagement, relationships, partnerships, collaborations, and communication through professional development. Underpinning these issues are broader implications concerning social connection, establishing a sense of belonging and a sense of wellbeing, combating isolation, sensitivity toward cultural identity, and teaching protective factors to children. This research is developing a deep and reflective understanding of the perceptions and responses for family and community identity and the connections between all stakeholder relationships.

Bourdieu understands, "human capital … as a secure sense of self-identity, confidence in expressing one's own opinions, and emotional intelligence, enables young people to

become learners, and so to be more successful in school and in society" (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 4). Education is as much or more a perspective that teaches us about who we are, about other people, about how to interact successfully with others, about how to be part of successful relationships, and about how to have positive notions and understanding of self and their identity, and this can arguably be considered greater than economics alone.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH CONTEXT

Every child is entitled to a quality education that respects and promotes their right to dignity and optimum development, but achieving this goal is complex. The right to education is high on the agenda of the international community. This goal is affirmed in many human rights treaties, and recognised by governments around the world as pivotal in the pursuit of development and social transformation. This recognition is exemplified in the international goals, strategies and targets that have been set during the past 20 years.

In Australia there are approximately, "12% or 500,000 of the population who are growing up in poverty" (Liddell, Barnett, Roost & McEachran, 2011, p. vii). A recent report indicated that of the 24 million people residing in Australia, 1.5 million Australians are experiencing chronic disadvantage despite Australia's two decades of sustained economic growth. Children born into disadvantage or vulnerable households are more likely to experience disadvantage throughout their lifetime and approximately 1 in 4 who find their way out of poverty return again within 2 years (Committee for Economic Development in Australia (CEDA, 2015). Despite ongoing efforts to help disadvantaged children in Australia, there appears to be little progress in assisting these families and children.

Background

This qualitative research study through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis looks at the enablers and barriers of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families in ECEC from a values driven human rights perspective. There are children all over the world missing out on education, who need it the most. Children at risk benefit most from the positive role education can play in their growth, health and development. It uses both a sociocultural and ecological perspective. This positive social engineering that can take place through education can have great impacts on the opportunities and future success of individual children, families, the broader community and society with significant social, economic and health impacts. Research participants fall into three stakeholder groups—ECEPs, the families, and their children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. They partook in an online survey and semi-structured interviews and children's drawings have been analysed. I sought to understand the lived experiences of my participants in their social worlds. The evidence-based data was sought to provide support, influence and build capacity

in future planning, policy development, professional practice and training in the area of ECEC for vulnerable, disadvantaged children and their families.

Focus

There have been few studies that investigate the coalface for ECEPs in ECEC settings, and even fewer that take into account the lived experiences of the children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. It is hoped that my study will support changes in all areas that are value-based as well as, evidence-based and seek to identify practical outcomes to change policy and service practice, aiming to improve the everyday experiences of these individual families and children while supporting ECEPs in their role. Social Inclusion, Access, Participation and Engagement are the key elements needed to make the early years a time of success, growth, development and enjoyment.

World Context

Internationally evidence has shown, quality ECEC settings can improve a child's social and cognitive skills and abilities and their future educational successes particularly for those children in need (Lynch, 2005). These early years' experiences are:

> instrumental in improving social and employment outcomes for families. Successful developmental outcomes are dependent on availability and quality of early childhood programs. To date, access and affordability are continuing problems in Australia, and concepts of quality can be nebulous and difficult to assess. (Elliot, 2006, p. 3)

The Dakar Framework for Action mandated UNESCO to coordinate key partners, in cooperation with the four other convenors of the Dakar Forum: (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund **(**UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank). As the leading agency, UNESCO focuses its activities on five key areas: policy dialogue, monitoring, advocacy, mobilisation of funding and capacity development (UNESCO, 2000, p. 1). UNICEF (2007b) asserts that inclusion demands:

> the recognition of all children as full members of society and the respect of all of their rights, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, language, poverty or impairment. Inclusion involves the removal of barriers that might prevent the enjoyment of these rights and requires the creation of appropriate supportive and protective environments. (p. 1)

Also:

> in the context of education, inclusion means the creation of barrier-free and child-focussed learning environments, including for the early years. This means providing appropriate supports to ensure that all children receive education in non-segregated local facilities and settings whether formal or informal. (UNICEF, 2007b, p. 1)

It is essential that the education of children:

> be directed to the development of their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; to the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding and tolerance. (p. 1)

Australian Context

In 2006 the Australian Government published *My Child—Universal Access in Early Childhood Education* (Elliott, 2006) which asserted that, "the Australian Government has made a commitment to provide all children with access to quality early childhood education by 2013" (p. 32). Such access allows children the, "basic skills for life and learning that can have positive effect on future education, employment and health outcomes" (Elliott, p. 32). Australia within the world context:

> is doing well economically. Financial living standards, as measured by gross national income per capita, represent a key component of the Human Development Index developed by the United Nations. Among the 169 nations assessed, Australia now ranks 13th according to this measure, having achieved 15th place in 2000. (Baxter & Hand, 2013, p. 16)

In Australia as in many developed countries Modernity's Paradox is that there is, "increasing wealth and opportunities … yet the human race is experiencing deteriorating health and wellbeing outcomes and an increasing gap between the haves and have nots" (Knox City Council, 2010d, p. 5). While there is an overall growth in prosperity there is evidence of growing health and social inequity in Australia. It is imperative to look at how change is possible to increase better outcomes for children. While most people would support the notion of such issues as equality, diversity, justice, and equity, there remains the need to show this link in practical ways and more definitive terms, to create the bridge between early years' investment, and a strong, economic, and humane society.

A child is influenced by their various contexts. Positively influencing that child's learning outcomes, provides them with the necessary skills and attributes to become well-adjusted and successful adults. The *National Early Years Learning Framework* (2009) identifies notions of being, belonging and becoming. The Early Years Learning Framework lays out its design and principles to include communication to, "secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships, partnerships … [to model] high expectations and equity, respect for diversity … [and] ongoing learning and reflective practice" (Australian Government, EYLF, pp. 1–12). The aim is to give teaching and learning a place of "common ground" (Australian Government, EYLF, p. 8) that provides ECEPs, policy deciders and advocates a frame for discussion and communication across a variety of services that affect children. A child's learning should focus on encouraging self-identity and connection, contribution, good communication skills, and wellbeing (Australian Government, *EYLF*, 2009/2010). Education frameworks, whether at the national, state, or local level represent and respond to notions of successful relationships and these skills are considered a great priority, particularly in the ECEC setting. To support the National Quality Framework there are 7 key areas: "educational programs and practice, childhood health and safety, physical environment, staffing, relationships, collaborative partnerships with families and communities, leadership and service management" (ASECQA, *Guide to the National Quality Framework*, 2013, p. 9). The most influential policy context frameworks in Australia include: Early Years Learning Framework (2009), National Framework to guide and inform learning for children in the Early Years, Victorian Government—Directions Paper: Victoria's Vulnerable Children—Our Shared Responsibility (2012), Strategy (2013), Access to Early Learning (AEL) Program, Vulnerable Children's Action Plan, and the Australian Government, Productivity Commission (2014).

Victorian Context

In Victoria recent initiatives aim to strengthen and support access and participation of vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children in early years' services (Victorian Government, 2012, 2013). Such initiatives have focused on prevention and early intervention made increasingly possible through joined-up, family-centred services. The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (2011), aims to provide guidance and support for ECEPs to work together with families to advance children's learning and development from birth to eight years. The recent Victorian Government's *Directions Paper: Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility*, (2012), highlights current programs such as,

the Access to Early Learning Program (AEL), and the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Project/Program Model, which recognise and prioritise the understanding of issues involving wellbeing in the early years of life, that should be considered to be the foundations of learning, behaviour and prosperity. Other initiatives have been undertaken but continued research in ECEC remains crucial. This research is timely, particularly when there is currently a global, federal, state and local audience and commitment to this field.

Increasingly relationships and effective communication are valued, particularly between ECEPs and families to support those families to become involved and engaged in their child's education and care. The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework is consistent with contemporary early childhood research and is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006). The Victorian Framework sets the highest expectations for every child. It identifies five Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes for all children:

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners
Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators (VEYLDF, 2016, p. 18)

ECEPs desire professional development aimed at assisting families with their children toward a successful ECEC experience. Teaching effectively means engaging the child, delivering high expectations, considering resilience factors, independent thinking and effective social skills. These social skills include, "peer-friendship-making, teacher-pleasing, self-management skills, assertiveness skills, communication with peers and adults, skills deficit, performance deficit, fluency deficit" (Ashman & Elkins, 2012, p. 149). The VELDF (2011) aims to support respectful relationships and responsive engagement. "These relationships protect, regulate and buffer children. They provide a secure base that helps children to feel safe and confident to try new things and to learn" (p. 11).

Several longitudinal studies have been undertaken that, "demonstrate that high-quality early childhood programs benefit all children's learning and development, regardless of their socio-economic background" (Victorian Government, DEECD, 2014, p. 2). Victoria's government, *Directions Paper: Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility*

(2012) indicates that while the Victorian government, "values the contribution of the community sector," as a real strength, this has led to a "multiplicity of providers". The directions paper notes that there is a, "lack of capacity, skills, knowledge, and governance [which] means that some organisations struggle, to maintain quality services" (p. 15). The notion of capacity building, linked together with the desires of further training and development, suggests that access to these service specific programs should be extended across sectors to include other service providers.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) Statistics 2009–2012

This index provides a snapshot of early childhood development that shows how young children in Australia have developed as they start their first year of full-time school. The five Developmental Domains are physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), communication skills and general knowledge. In each domain 12% of vulnerability is the national average.

Australia wide.

- In 2015 most children in Australia, nearly four in five, were developing well across the five developmental domains, consistent with results from 2009 and 2012.
- Fewer than 16% of children living in the least socio-economically disadvantaged communities were developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the developmental domains, compared to nearly 33% of children in the most disadvantaged communities.

Victoria.

- 19.9% of Victorian children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains—which is the lowest proportion of children of any state or territory. It is a slight increase in vulnerability from 2012 (19.5%) but remains an improvement from 2009 results (20.3%).

Australian society has dramatically changed in the last thirty years particularly around family structure and culture. Statistics indicate that, "4 in 5 Australian children are considered to be developmentally on track when they enter primary school, 22% are vulnerable in key areas such as language and cognitive skills or emotional maturity" (Australian Government,

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Child Wellbeing 0–-14, Introduction*, 2015).

The key Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (2015) findings included:

- The majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children were not considered developmentally vulnerable, 42.1% of Indigenous children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains.
- 22% of children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains.

Local Context

The local context for this research is the Knox Municipality that is located on the boundary of Yarra Ranges Municipality. The Knox Vision 2025 & Council Plan support the notion of:

> Every voice being valued, supportive and inclusive communities, lifelong learning, leading edge partnerships, investing in children and young people, the best education opportunities, seamless connectivity, [and] has a proud history of directly investing in delivering a large number of early years services" [as well as aims] to develop and implement sustainable strategies to increase the preschool participation. (Knox City Council, 2010d, p. 2)

Funding from the Eastern Metropolitan Region Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EMR, DEECD) and Knox City Council, "supports parents in their role as their child's first educators" (Knox City Council, 2010d, p. 2). The *Knox Community Wellbeing and Health Plan 2010*, relating to the AEDI results noted, "consistently better than average results for all childhood health and wellbeing indicators including developmental benchmarks .... The percentage of children (0–6 years) that are developmentally vulnerable is better than average and declined since the first *Australian Early Development Index*" (Knox City Council, 2016, p. 6). Within the Knox City Council there are interesting findings, particularly those of relative advantage in this locality. This might be due to its commitment to health and community services, and its community connectedness (Knox Vision 2025 & Council Plan, 2016).

There are a number of projects and programs that are seen as valuable by children and their families, supported by the results of Family and Children's Services Department—

Family Satisfaction Surveys together with some data from this study. Although participants often didn't identify these actual programs in this study they did identify outcomes from services provided through the two specific local programs implemented to support vulnerable children and their families—the Boronia, Bayswater and The Basin (BBB) Project and Buddy Program.

The Buddy Program offers a successful collaborative process that engages families as volunteers and community leaders in a range of participatory roles. Volunteers and community leaders are trained up as buddies to take the role of leading the welcoming of all new families to help them feel included and to be a contact person who is available to families at ECEC services in Knox Council, particularly families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The Buddy Role was developed to enhance opportunities for families in early years services to connect with each other and their local community. Essentially the Buddy is an 'intentional friend' who welcomes, includes and supports other families to engage and participate in Early Years Services. In addition, the Buddy role brings a curious mind to committee meetings looking for opportunities to challenge and enhance current practice whilst also advocating for a diverse range of families.

The BBB Project sought to understand the enablers and barriers families experienced in their child's early years education and usage of ECEC services. The intention of this pilot project was to further advocate for vulnerable families and to build capacity in the community. Professional development provided in support of this project, helped to raise awareness of the needs of vulnerable families (Knox City Council, 2010d). Through the results of this pilot project aimed at supporting families it was discovered that:

> diversifying the product was effective but there were also many barriers to access; perception of experiences in the physical setting, lack of transport, hours, integration with other services, lack of availability of places, information, training, cultural issues, and the importance for the role of play in long-term education and employment outcomes of their children. (Knox City Council, 2012a, pp. 7–8)

Other such conclusions included the:

> value of face-to-face contact, extent to which participation in preschool programs can build capacity in vulnerable communities, implementation of actions by project officer ... effective in establishing strong networks and the Council's role in the delivery of

> preschool programs, flexibility in the enrolment process and fee structure. (Knox City Council, 2012a, p. 8)

The Project Officer needed to, "ensure [that people] became involved because they felt passionate about it and recognised a need within their service rather than participation for material gains" (Knox City Council, 2012a, p. 9). It was interesting to note that for future projects that being "trained' gave volunteers more confidence in approaching families" (Knox City Council, 2010b, p. 11).

Participants—Introductory Comments

With ethical approval gained from MUHREC (see Appendix A) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Education (DEECD) (see Appendix B) and permission granted from the Manager of Family and Children's Services Department, Knox City Council (see Appendix C), there will be three groups of participants in this research study based at Knox Council Family and Children's Services Department.

Online surveys, semi-structured interviews and drawings were conducted with the following groups:

- Group 1—(Early Childhood Educators and Professionals)—online survey and semi-structured interview
- Group 2—(Families of children attending early childhood services)—online survey and semi-structured interview
- Group 3—(Children of families using early childhood services)—questions and drawing

Factors Involving Early Childhood Educators and Professionals

The Victorian Early Years Learning Development Framework (VEYLDF) is intended to support all professionals who work with children from birth to eight years, including maternal and child health nurses, all ECEPs who work directly with children in early childhood settings, school teachers, outside school hours care professionals, family support workers, preschool field officers, inclusion support facilitators, student support service officers, primary school nurses, primary welfare officers, early childhood intervention

workers, play therapists, health professionals, teachers working in hospitals, and education officers in cultural organisations.

Types of disadvantage. ECEPs will be working with wide-ranging and often multiple types of disadvantage. These include, children who are vulnerable, at risk, or in need; children subject to abuse, neglect, and/or trauma, children with health concerns, cognitive, behavioural difficulties, developmental difficulties, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, family stressors, economic stressors, cultural issues, mental health issues, special needs and can include factors such as substance misuse, family violence, and problem gambling (VEYLDF, 2013).

Factors Involving Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Families

Family-centred practice assists children and their families to access, engage and participate in ECEC services. It is necessary to understand the life-world of vulnerable, disadvantaged families and their children including those with disabilities, seeking to discover what is truly important to them. A family-centred approach is crucial as the family has the greatest influence on their child's life. Through raising families' awareness of the importance of education, the chance for success for these children alongside their everyday peers can be broadened and strengthened. Family-centred practice involves viewing the, "family as the unit of attention, with family choices, focusing on strengths not deficits perspective, and cultural sensitivity with [the]worker-family relationship …[modelling] the cornerstone qualities of empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 7).

Henderson and Berla (1994) reviewed and analysed eighty-five studies that documented the comprehensive benefits of parent involvement in children's education. This and other studies show that, "parent involvement activities that are effectively planned and well implemented result in substantial benefits to children, parents, educators, and the school" (Olsen & Fuller, 2008, p. 160). According to Henderson and Berla (1994), the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income, or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to, "create a home environment that encourages learning, express[es] high, (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers, become[s] involved in their children's education at school, and in the community" (Olsen & Fuller, 2008, p. 160). The crucial process of engaging families in the education of their children, and being involved participants, feeling part of this process, accepted, not judged, having a positive relationship focus with ECEPs is necessary. This process, "where

possible needs to be deliberate and intentional, backed up by training, and the proactive use of communication, and [the development of] relationships with and between these different groups. The role of the parent is a predictor of outcomes for the child" (Weiss & Stephen, 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Toward this parental engagement model, there are some aspects of which we are already aware, that can affect outcomes for the family and child, such as, "a parent's self-efficacy beliefs" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 25). The notion of enabling change, the subject matter of this thesis aligns with the thoughts of Moore, Goldfield, Schroeder, Inkelas, Lye and Phemister (2012), that it is a "set of skills that help parents change the way that they look at situations" (p. 32). Further to this point, it has been noted that parents can have, "feelings of uncertainty" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 49) in child rearing, for example, breastfeeding and the need for the availability of "crisis intervention" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 56). Educators are trained to be educators and while parents rely mostly on the modelling of parenting they have experienced. It is significantly important that families are in an ECEC environment where they experience positive modelling and feel able to seek advice and guidance to support them to be confident and well equipped for parenting.

Factors Involving Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Children

The voice of the child needs to be valued and encouraged. Although, there is limited literature on the positive aspects that early childhood intervention programs can have on vulnerable children, due to a small number of longitudinal studies. Children can achieve better outcomes, with "resiliency, life skills, and personal attributes also known as protective factors" (T. Cox, 2000, p. 87). It is thought that social and emotional development, positive behaviour intervention support and trauma informed practice should be taught as part of the learning process and embedded in the curriculum. The curriculum contains outcomes that are cognitive, developmental, emotional, and social together with the specifics of disciplines such as science, literacy and numeracy. Consideration of change to the curriculum is suggested so that it explicitly expresses the need for the development of resilience, protective factors, and inclusive practices that interplay with the content, which is at the core of value-based teaching. Through a process of scaffolding, "the educator's decisions and actions build on children's existing knowledge and skills to enhance their learning" (Australian Government, EYLF, 2009, p. 14). Reflecting inclusive values in early childhood and school policy approaches, together with the teacher's deliberate modelling of inclusive practice and focus

on positive interactions with children, furthers acceptance of diversity. Frameworks and policy contexts guide the way in which children are taught, not only for common ground for communication and discussion between ECEPs and children and their families, but as a commitment toward best practice.

ECEPs in their teachings in the ECEC setting noted that, whilst in the expression and process of play the teacher can guide these processes with children to deliberately express particular values and ideologies, such as, social inclusion, diversity, fairness and cultural sensitivity. In doing so it is hoped that a child might begin to understand their network, increasing the depth of contexts into their life-worlds. Framing these deliberations is necessary to guide practice and ensure that best outcomes will result. As, "children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others learning, they recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning" (Australian Government, EYLF, 2009, p. 9). This represents the ideology of a child's own collaboration in their own learning, as they negotiate the patterns of relationships presented to them, as a learner, and as a part of their independent understanding of the world. For the child within their contexts it is a continual process, which begins as early as pre-birth and/or birth experiences, of learning, understanding, and bringing these ideas into their own social map of the world. This period is extremely sensitive as children begin to understand the world around them. Education, health and wellbeing during these early years provides the opportunity to enhance these experiences. While a vulnerable child's experiences might make them more sensitive to the influences of their varying contexts this intervention, which is part of the process of education can set children on a trajectory to greater success in the future.

Aspects Involving Community

My research findings highlight relationships as an essential aspect of community building. A community is not just a place or a location, or individuals who happen to share the same local or global resources. Rather, a community is about the relationships that people build together, the connections and links people make as they work towards shared goals and expectations while going about their everyday lives. Children are important members of a community, although their participation is sometimes over-looked in terms of their roles in building a sense of community. Overwhelmingly, research shows that positive relationships

build strong communities and support positive identity construction, and mental, social and emotional health.

The EYLF identifies many aspects of a child's learning and states that, "children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity" (EYLF, p. 34). Children can at times be subject to risk factors that impact their health, wellbeing and development.

Where Research Takes Place—Knox City Council

Figure 2 The research site

Region—The area used for this project was the Knox Municipality Melbourne, Victoria. Knox is a group of suburbs in Outer East Melbourne.

Venue—The research and data collection took place at the Family and Children's Services Department, Knox City Council

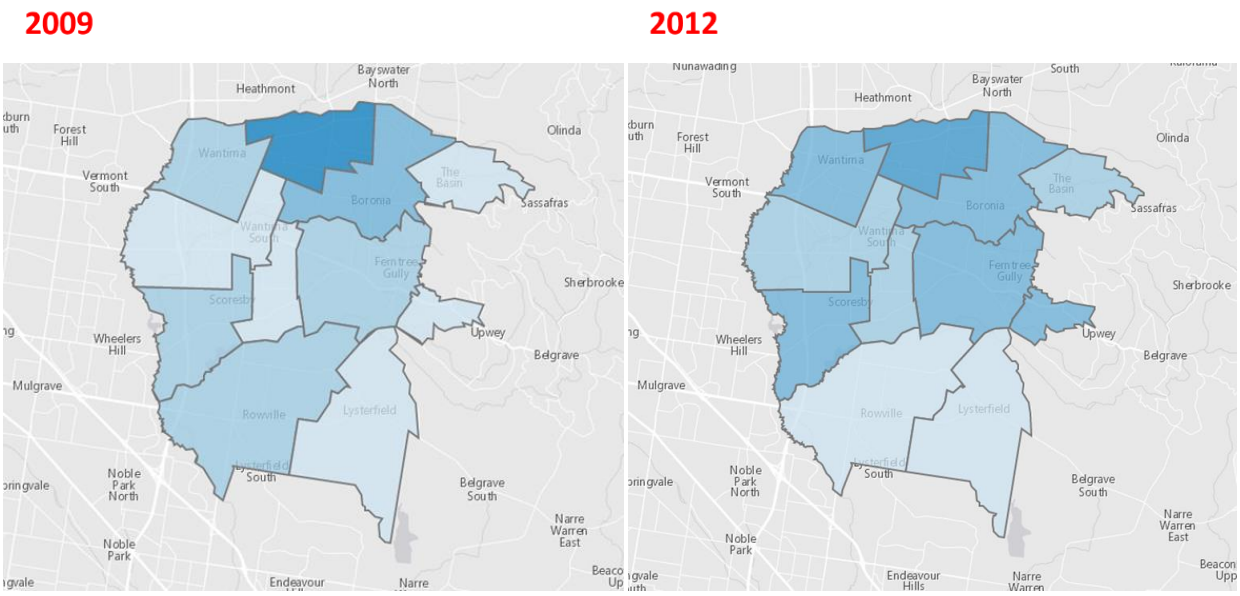


Figure 3 AEDI Knox Region map showing developmental vulnerability in two or more domains) (Source: AEDI [2009], [2012]. Knox Community profile)

The maps in figure 3 indicate the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) relating to Knox in 2009 and 2012. This Census provides a snapshot of early childhood development that shows how young children in Australia have developed as they start their first year of full-time school.

The maps also demonstrate that areas of most disadvantage are continuing to grow in Knox and are currently reflected in Bayswater, Boronia, The Basin and Ferntree Gully, which are represented by the darker blue areas.

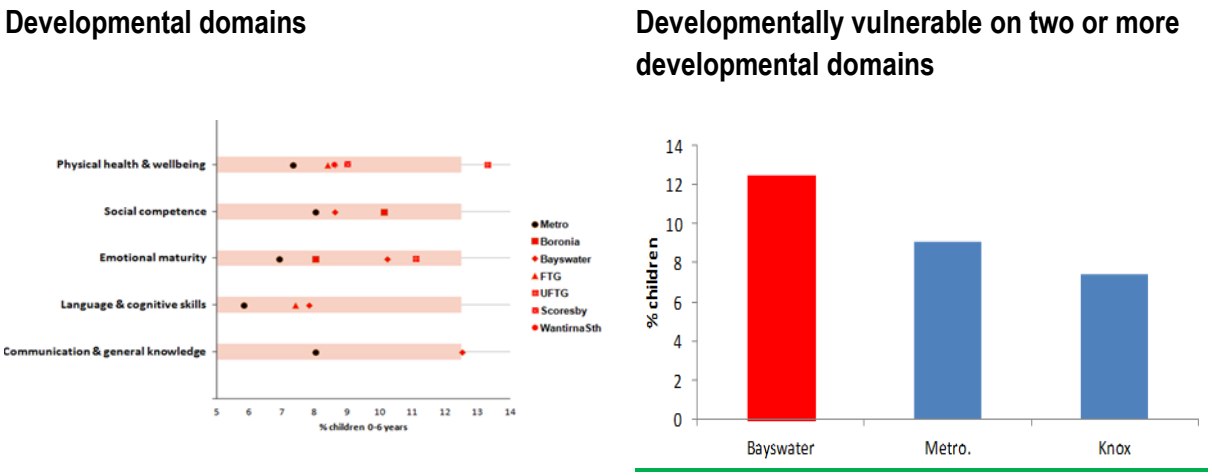


Figure 4 Knox region areas of vulnerability (Source: AEDI [2012]. Knox Community profile)

The first graph identifies the developmental domains in the following areas: Physical Health and Wellbeing, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language and Cognitive skills, Communication and General Knowledge. The average of vulnerable and disadvantaged children is around 12% for each domain. The second graph underlines the multiple vulnerabilities in the Knox Area, particularly in Bayswater.

Table 2

AEDC Results 2015—Knox Region—Percentages of vulnerability within the 5 Domains from 2009, 2012, and 2015 (Source: (AEDI). (2012). Knox Community profile)

Date	***Vulnerability 1***	***Vulnerability 2***
2009	***17%***	***7.7%***
2012	***15.5%***	***7.4%***
2015	***15.8%***	***6.5%***

The latest AEDC results showed a drop that in 2009 to 2015 there was a fall of 1.5% in vulnerability domain 1 and from 7.7% to 6.5% in vulnerability domain 2.

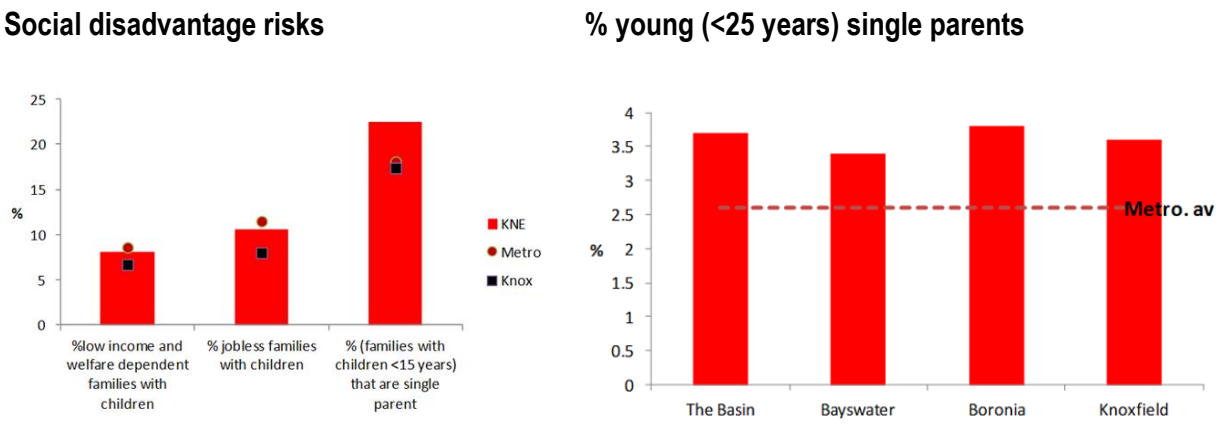


Figure 5 Risk of social disadvantage in the Knox Region—Family structure, low income and housing disadvantage (Source: AEDI [2012]. Knox Community profile)

There is a higher risk of social disadvantage for children and young people living in the Knox North East. More children are living in one-parent, low income, welfare dependent or jobless families. The Knox Region has significant areas of reduced housing stability, high residential mobility and homelessness.

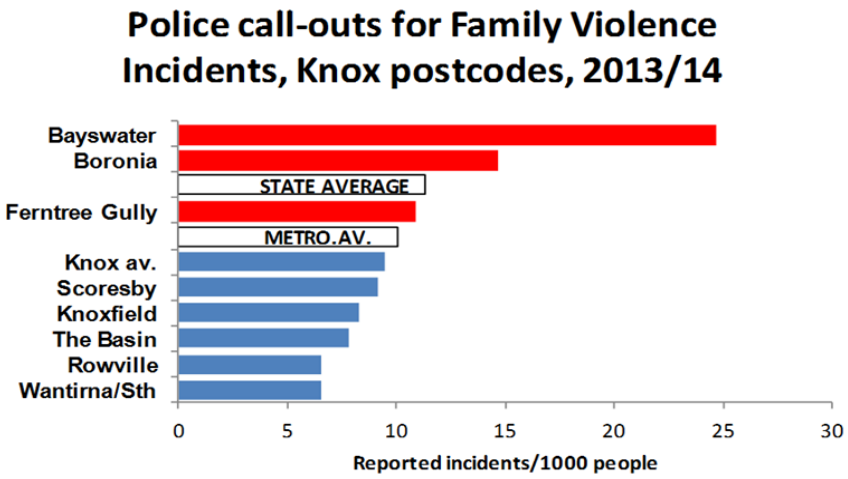


Figure 6 Risk factors - family violence

The Knox Region experiences a high rate of reported family violence in Boronia, Bayswater and Ferntree Gully. All reported incidents are higher than metro and state average with Bayswater being over double the state average. There is a high rate of reported family violence, including family violence incidents with suspected alcohol involvement as well as family incidents where children/young people are present.

Health, Wellbeing and Development

Laletus, Reupert, & Goodyear (2017), explored the experiences and workforce requirements of ECEPs working with preschool children living with parental mental illness. They noted that, "The prevalence of developmentally vulnerable children living with parental mental illness has been well documented, however due to stigmatised attitudes and prejudice these children may be 'hidden' and not identified as requiring additional assistance in early childhood settings" (Laletas, Reupert, & Goodyear, 2017, p. 71).

There were four central themes identified in this study, including child development issues, tension around referral and work anxiety, inadequate knowledge and training about parental mental illness, and various strategies to support these families. Strategies recommended to deal with the issues for children included, specifically designed resources

about parental mental illness and the referral pathways available, professional development regarding mental health awareness and understanding of the impact of parental mental health on preschool children attending ECECs. Additionally family centred practice should be promoted encouraging sensitive engagement with families. At a service/organisational level adequate time and mentoring/supervision should be provided for ECEPs to assist in managing the stressors of their role while encouraging them to take care of themselves by adopting restorative practices such as self-care and self-reflection. The research confirms that we should not underestimate the value of family involvement.

For positive health, wellbeing and development it is necessary to have, "social resources, quality of life, employability, self-efficacy and skills" (Liddell et al., 2011, pp. 52–53). Through early childhood intervention via education it is anticipated that every child and every family will develop the resiliency and skills:

> When parents are happy, content and well supported, they are in the best possible position to be responsive and available to their baby this helps to develop a strong, secure bond [and helps babies] to develop physically, mentally and emotionally. Good emotional health and communication also helps to maintain positive relationships. (Beyond Blue, 2016, p. 13)

When a family feels well and content they, "are better able to cope with stress, maintain relationships and enjoy life." (Beyond Blue, 2016, p. 4). This time in an individual or family's life can either be a time of joy or for some it is fraught with difficulties which might include factors relating to relationship breakdown, finances, social isolation, issues of safety, and parenting ability. Through intervention it is possible to affect the lives of, "at risk children and their families. Education can be a form of intervention giving children opportunities to broaden their contexts and improve their cognitive, social, developmental and emotional wellbeing" (T. Cox, 2000, p. 89).

> The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Department of Education and Early Childhood, 2009) and the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) highlight the importance of children having a strong sense of wellbeing, as this is one of the key learning outcomes in early childhood education and care (ECEC). (Marbina, Mashford-Scott, Church & Tayler, 2015, p. 4)

The Assessment of Wellbeing in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review (2015), "identifies key components of children's wellbeing—particularly in relation to opportunities for learning" (p. 4.).

Drawing upon the discoveries made in the literature review, a key resource, *The Wellbeing Practice Guide* (2016), in support of the implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VELDF) was developed. Using the theory and pedagogy already underpinning everyday practice, this resource provides information to, support ECEPs' practice and strengthen their understanding of the importance of wellbeing (VCAA, 2016.).

Principles

The following four subheadings come from Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2011).

The interests of the child are paramount. While the needs of parents and the social and economic objectives of individuals, business, and government all have a place in this discussion, recognising the interests of the child is the key issue, which provides a common focus for these competing considerations, and rightly prioritises the inherent agency and value of children (COAG, 2011). This research agrees with the principle of the child as the central point focussing on attention to, and concern for, their health, wellbeing and education. It is necessary to turn our attention to the families and in particular the relationship between the family as the child's first caregiver and the crucial role they play in the life of their child. Relationship-building is a matter of interest for this study, investigating how to achieve authentic communication to support relationships for the benefit of the child.

Relationship building is focussed around such notions as trust, perception of relationships, accessibility of ECEPs, the ability to overcome time constraints, and to be able to spend quality time with families, assisting and guiding them in the progress of their child's learning and development, reflecting a type of "let's work together" approach (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 110). Relationships are built on constructs, ideals, and values; we also develop and grow in the understanding of specific family's needs. While the ECEPs are focussed on education, cognitive, social, emotional, developmental and life skills there are other areas in which a family might need support, for example, in interactions with their child, or guidance

on developmental milestones, to give their child the best start in life. This might require a holistic approach.

Parents have the primary role in their child's development. This study acknowledges the role of, "parents as the first and most important carers and educators of their children." Currently, "the role of ECEC services is to support and complement parents, rather than replace them" (COAG, 2011, p. 2). Consequently, we seek information on what families are looking for in a service, then we seek to build the bridges of knowledge and understanding to reduce this gap.

ECEC services should be universally accessible. The notion of accessibility across the board involves factors like public and private transport, outreach programs, monetary concerns and time constraints. Yet it would be deleterious to reduce the notion of accessibility to such concerns alone. Universal access to ECEC services is essential for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families. Governments should respect and collaborate with families and the community to ensure services are viable, high quality, affordable and accessible to all families, regardless of their circumstances, both now and into the future.

All ECEC services should be of high quality to support good developmental outcomes. The "evidence continues to demonstrate that the quality of ECEC services matters. While they may be more costly, good quality ECEC services generate significant and lasting benefits for children" (COAG, 2011, p. 2). While the collaborative approach with families in itself empowers and creates good will, it is important in seeking to end the cycle of disadvantage that these families are prioritised and provided with far greater support. Though volunteer projects may assist at times gaps in time and money should not define the quality of services. The fundamental premise is that funding must be made available on an ongoing basis to support qualified staff with expertise in the education care and development of young children, as well as quality resources in ECEC settings.

Inclusion—An Introduction

In the Victorian Early Years Learning Development Framework (VEYLDF) inclusion:

> involves taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure

> that all children's experiences are recognised and valued, and that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference. (VEYLDF, 2013)

According to Mittler (2000) an inclusion model:

> implies a radical reform of the school in terms of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and grouping of individuals. It is based on a value system that welcomes and celebrates diversity arising from gender, nationality, race, language of origin, social background, level of educational achievement or disability. (p. 10)

An inclusive service is described by Carbone (2004) as, one that provides access for all and acknowledges the shared humanity and cultural diversity of people. Further, an inclusive service should provide acceptance, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity for participation recognising the different needs and levels of autonomy of people and their control over resources. Inclusive services should try to counteract inequalities, act as agents of change, and seek to overcome deprivation and disadvantage.

Access Issues

Access issues are significant and remain an unknown quantity. The term access usually refers to vulnerable children and their families' ability or capacity to be involved and participate in ECEC services. Access difficulties can exist as service level (or structural) barriers and, may include such factors as those arising from: publicity issues, costs, availability issues, timing of services, difficult eligibility criteria, difficult to reach locations, public transport issues, hours of service availability, lack of flexibility, financial costs of childcare, coordination difficulties, and lack of outreach services (Anning, Stuart, Nicholls, Goldthorpe & Morley, 2007; Attride-Stirling, Davis, Markless, Sclare & Day, 2001; Barlow Kirkpatrick, Stewart-Brown & Davis, 2005; Carbone et al., 2004, Katz et al., 2007; Winkworth et al., 2009, 2010). For example, for families, transport, physical or social isolation can cause difficulties in accessing ECEC services; these time constraints, difficulties, and their circumstances can act as barriers (Coe, Spencer & Stutterford, 2008). Rural areas sometimes have little or no network of services making it difficult to promote participation (Garbers, Tunstill, Allnock & Akhurst, 2006). Social exclusion can be a result of access issues, a limitation of capacity and ability (Hayes, Gray & Edwards, 2008) and can be linked to poverty (Saunders, Naidoo & Griffiths, 2007; Hayes et al., 2008) and is "fundamentally

about a lack of connectedness and participation" (McDonald, 2011, pp. 1–2). The notion of "access is about creating opportunities for children to participate in ECEC programs" (Baxter & Hand, *Executive Summary*, 2013). Other barriers may include, "families being distrustful and tired of services particularly when services are only temporary" (Doherty, Hall & Kinder 2003, Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009, p. 10). ECEPs may have difficulties in providing opportunities for access such as time constraints. Although featured minimally in the research literature, there were a number of issues concerning access raised by the participants in this study. Accessibility in terms of enablers might include such things as further outreach support, time availability of ECEPs and services, time for individual planning, ability and time for services to support case management across sectors, with and alongside ECEPs.

Participation

Every child has the right to participate fully in an ECEC service regardless of their needs and circumstances. All children should have a sense of belonging and feel accepted and included. Vulnerable and disadvantaged children may require further support to enable them to participate meaningfully in a program and be an active participant in the activities provided in an ECEC service. There are a number of factors that influence children and their families access and participation in an ECEC setting including the socio-economic status of families, parental beliefs and preferences, culturally and linguistically diverse background, indigenous background and children experiencing disability and developmental delay. Vulnerable and disadvantaged families are less likely to access an ECEC setting particularly in the year before they start full-time school (AIFS, 2015). Participation rates are alarming where access and participation figures show that, "nationwide in 2005, only 61% of four-year-old children out of an estimated 259,140 four-year-olds attended an educationally oriented pre-school" (ABS, *National Health Survey*, 2006, p. 39). In total "208,300 children aged 4 and 5 years participated in preschool education (159,200 four-year-olds and 49,100 five-year-olds) in 2005" (ABS, *National Health Survey*, 2006, p. 20).

Engagement

Family participation and engagement in ECEC settings can be complex and dynamic. As a result of major social change over the last two decades the ECEC service capacity to be responsive is under extreme pressure. To support the evolving needs of contemporary families ECEC services themselves need to be evolving to ensure that they adapt to the altered

conditions of diverse families and the challenges these families face in raising young children with different priorities and values to be addressed in today's societal context. Effective engagement is critically important for both families and ECECs to deliver improved outcomes for children and their families (CFCA, 2016).

In society's such as Australia it has become important, "to acknowledge the growing expectations of citizens to be more effectively involved [and engaged] in policymaking and service design, and to explore the responsibilities and capacities of the Australian Public Service (APS) to initiate and facilitate such engagement" (Holmes, 2011, p. 2). The original idea that inspired this work was to empower families to recognise their own humanitarian rights. This is part of the process of being engaged, participating and being empowered to be active community members, users of education, gaining political influence. The family, and the child should be encouraged to be part of this process, of decision-making, of being included, collaboratively, and individually in the ECEC experience.

It is critical to focus on enhancing child and family engagement. The child is the starting point in parenting skill development programs which, "attempt to develop and enhance the quality and style of nurturing that children receive from their parents" (Victoria—Office of the Public Advocate [OPA], 2003, p. 69). It is noted that parents should, "in our community [be] properly supported in the challenging task of raising their children. This can involve equipping parents to create optimal environments for children to grow and develop" (OPA, 2003, p. 70). What parents do in their thousands of daily interactions with their children are, "among the strongest predictors of a range of psychosocial and developmental problems in children" (OPA, 2003, p. 70).

The home environment is a, "place where the child can have the opportunity to develop and experience wellbeing through their relationships with their caregivers or parents" (Tymchuk & Andron, 1992, p. 3). ECEC services need to seek ways to support families in the home around skills they might need to develop their parenting abilities in an effort to enhance their child's health, wellbeing and education. Strategies might include understanding the value and importance of play along with supporting children with acquisition of reading and writing skills that will help prepare them for transition into pre-school and school.

Each family has its own structure, rules, customs and regulations that it lives by that forms the foundation of the family unit. Understanding the thought processes that

frame families' attitudinal constructs might be difficult as it revolves around the notion of perceptions. These can be difficult to ascertain as perceptions may not accurately reflect the reality of the situation, yet they remain relevant in any kind of social exchange. Families often fail to engage as a result of feeling judged, however assisting families can mean that, "substantial time needs to be invested in eliciting, clarifying and building commitment to personal goals—goals related to improving the parent's life and circumstances; goals related to the care and nurturing of the child; and goals related to the family unit" (Victoria—OPA, 2003, p. 74). There are substantial implications for service providers in order to take steps to remedy families' failure to engage; they must be prepared to allocate both human and financial resources.

Interventions must be agents of change and to support parents they should be, "embedded in a broader eco-behavioural perspective and individuals broader physical, social and psychological environment if parents are to acquire and maintain new skills over time" (Victoria—OPA, 2003, p. 82). The act of intervention means that families have an opportunity to add positive value to their child's life. It is in effect a form of social engineering, which broadens and extends a family's life-world specifically in this case through ECEC services.

Encouragement and Strategies Involving Families

The on the ground strategies that shape integrated service delivery include:

> Empowerment—supporting children, families and communities to make their own decisions and set their own goals. Workers scaffold and guide rather than provide solutions. A strengths-based approach with all individuals, families and communities … and learning works best when it grows from existing knowledge and skills [in the] "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1979). Learning also works [effectively] when people feel proud of who they are and what they have achieved and when they feel confident they can learn and they have something to offer. (Sims, 2012)

When collaboration happens there is the notion of an, "exchange taking place that involves, includes, and improves the teaching learning experience" (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Dettmer, Dyck & Thurston, 1999; Menna & Mathews, 2003; Sanders 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Villa & Thousand, 2000).

Areas of Change—Relationships and Communication

The notion of "parallel processes" means that all relationships are impacted by the way relationships can be enhanced or undermined by such interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Moore, 2006, 2007; Mothersole, 1999; Pawl, 1984; Pawl & St. John, 1998). A person's experience is affected by their inner world, and through their relationships with others. This can impact a person's thinking, emotions and behaviour (Gowen & Nebrig, 2001). This very much aligns with an Ecological and Sociocultural perspective and is not outside the realms of understanding the phenomena looking through the lens of enablers and barriers in early childhood education.

Relationship building is part of a scaffolding process when teachers work with a student or child's learning experience. This study seeks to discover what role communication can play in relationships and recognises that relationships play a significant and active part in promoting a child's early experiences. Using an IPA approach common understandings may be created within each stakeholder group. The ECEPs have some similar contexts bound by rules, legalities, qualifications and training, knowledge and skills, and sometimes families do not share the same contexts. Each process is different but when using a grouping (a stakeholder group) that shares a common understanding then those themes align and present in this way during the data collection and analysis.

Communication and Positive Parenting

Communication is crucially important and impacts every kind of relationship, and: "Parental communication is one of the key ways in which the family can act as a protective health asset, promoting pro-social values that equip young people to deal with stressful situations or buffer them against adverse influences" (WHO, 2009/10, p. 19). Focussing on communication it is noted that, "good communication with mothers, within the family and with fathers can have strong influences on feelings of self-worth, self-image and positive behaviour" (WHO, 2009/10) [and] "act as protective factors for children" (WHO, 2009/2010, p. 19).

Having affective, "communication with parents is key to establishing the family as a protective factor" (WHO 2009/2010, p. 7). This research study looks further into what communication skills, and styles might support the education process and enhance relationships. This research study aspires to an understanding of communication through a

values-based approach that is expressed and shared through trust and empathy and requires time and familiarity to develop these feelings, perceptions and experiences. These can only act as a protective factor for both children and their families allowing them to feel safe to share their difficulties. When openness occurs people can connect with others combating such factors as isolation, encouraging feelings of inclusion and belonging.

Diversity, Cultural Responsiveness and Strategies—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and Refugees

Internationally and in Australia there is fairly recent history regarding culture and its recognition and understanding in society. While cultural definitions, attitudes and beliefs expressed or unexpressed have been an important topic, "during the 1970s there was growing attention across many nations, including Australia, [given] to *cultural awareness*; an initial step towards understanding difference between cultural groups. The focus was on *difference* rather than *diversity*, which includes similarities as well as differences" (Perso, 2012, pp. 18–19). In the 1980s, this focus was replaced with a notion of *cultural sensitivity* that delineates value judgments and supports, "knowledge of different cultural groups" (Eisenbruch & Volich, 2005, Perso, 2012, pp. 18–19). Cultural competence in the mid-1980s focussed on different outcomes relating to cultural issues and aimed at assisting access to address inequities in the system (Grote, 2008).

In Australia the ATSI population is 2.5% of the Australian population (ABS, *Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Survey*, 2012). Of this population, "over half live in cities, one quarter in remote communities in Northern Territory, over 30% are Aboriginal, and 40% are younger than 18 years" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 104). A small step in the right direction was the acknowledgment of the Stolen Generation and Australia's apology to the Aboriginal people for their displacement as the first peoples of Australia and the harm that came to them as a culture as a result of taking children from their natural family environment. Unfortunately, there remains the perception that all ATSI groups have a fixed identity within their groupings [which] is misleading and many ATSI groups have cultures that contain thousands of years of their own approach to childrearing (Arney & Scott, 2013).

As with human rights legislation, in Australia in 2010 the Commonwealth launched the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, which has four goals,

"involvement ... in decision-making, equality of access to education services, equity of educational participation, and equitable and appropriate educational outcomes" (Perso, 2012, p. 8). Important for Indigenous Australians is the Closing the Gap Strategy, "to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians". These strategies are intended to:

> close the life expectancy gap within a generation, halve the gap in mortality rates, [that] four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years, halve the gap ... students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade, halve the gap [in] attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, halve the gap in employment outcomes. (Perso, 2012, p. 8)

Contemporary understanding shows that, "there is evidence that the many strengths in Indigenous children, parents, extended families and communities are often ignored by inappropriate interventions and by inexperienced (albeit well intentioned) practitioners" (Moore et al., 2012, p 61). Ethnic and cultural groups' needs, "vary widely according to their community of origin" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 61). Refugees might arrive in Australia with complex problems due to persecution in their countries of origin. They are likely to have experienced, "poverty, uncertainty, displacement, flight, seeking refuge, having no health, education and social service system, access to basic services, high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity rates" (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007, p. 16). It is essential to accommodate these varying groups who possess different needs and ensure that there are policies in place that address diversity, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) assistance, inclusive models and frameworks (Moore et al., (2012). Identifying such notions and values as "Respect, Reciprocity, Responsiveness" (p. 63) together with, "communication, collaboration, information, flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and access to culturally responsive childcare" (Arney & Scott, 2013, p. 99) is essential. The problem remains as to how to embed these ideals as practice, specifically everyday service delivery in ECECs, schools, across curriculum and teaching.

Curriculum/ECEP Roles

It is the rationale behind the Australian Curriculum that, "Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens [through] ideologies of quality, equity and transparency" (ACARA, 2013, p. 7). In Australia it

is noted that, "education plays a critical role in shaping the lives of the nation's future citizens. To play this role effectively, the intellectual, personal, social and educational needs of young Australians must be addressed at a time when ideas about the goals of education are changing and will continue to evolve" (ACARA, 2013, p. 7). Curriculum is a framework to learn the necessary skills to function productively throughout life. The notion of social engineering through education when practiced with accountability and transparency can present opportunities to raise a student's expectations and achievement levels.

Siraj-Blatchford (2009a), with reference to Article 2(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 argues that:

> adults might be considered to have a responsibility as citizens for teaching young children in societies that are characterised by social injustice and inequality. I argue the case for a curriculum for early childhood that recognises their vulnerability, and that recognises the power that every adult to affect (for good or bad) the self-identity, behaviour, actions, intentions, understandings and beliefs of the children they interact with. This does not mean that children are entirely powerless—far from it—but they are vulnerable around adults. We need to consider how it is that young children who are in our care learn about and experience class bias, sexism, and racism. We know that all children pick up stereotypical knowledge and understanding from their environment and try to make their own meanings from this experience. Outside experiences can come from parental views, media images and the child's own observations of how other individuals from their social class, gender, ethnic or language group are seen and treated. In the absence of strong and positive role models children are often left with negative perceptions. This bias can start from birth. (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2009, p. 153)

Looking at inclusion involves, "identifying shared characteristics [which] is at the heart of a culture of inclusion" (Ashman & Elkins, 2012, p. 23).

Classroom Teaching

In the classroom it is important for, ECEP's to achieve set outcomes for the child, encourage child participation and support their sense of wellbeing, independence, identity, and self-determination (Dempsey & Arthur-Kelly, 2007). The classroom should be an inclusive environment that respects diversity and allows a child the chance for free expression

in play and be a safe place to be, become and belong. The classroom needs to be a place for learning the necessary skills needed for life, as well as social skills, relationship building alongside other cognitive and developmental goals. Training as well as the positive aspects of cross-sector collaboration and familiarity was indicated as necessary to assist staff in areas where they may be uncertain. Often frameworks pay little attention to the role of leadership, mentoring and peer support within schools and ECEC services and yet, "the leading practice literature confirms the pivotal role of school leaders in implementing an inclusive vision ... [the] necessary disposition, knowledge and skills....Informed leadership" (Shaddock, et al., 2009, p. 142) is an assumed expectation. Leadership is guided by various frameworks, policy directions, and organisational requirements. In developing successful programs, it is important in the education process to include strategies to support the, "learning, to nurture the academic, social, emotional and moral development of each student" (Shaddock et al., 2009, p. 57).

Resources

While resources might seem like the most important factor in assisting those with disadvantage, a means index that is difficult to change, and where there are continual funding concerns, it is necessary to redirect the focus away from these issues in the everyday negotiation of early childhood. It is recognised that the issues are backed by policy factors. While there is, "not a strong body of research to show that *finance* in itself has a direct and major effect on student learning outcomes, other research has found ... that particular *types of expenditure* do have a positive impact on student learning" (Shaddock et al., p. 90). In terms of needing and receiving support it is interesting that Slee (2006) noted, in looking at vulnerable individuals and families and the sources of help and support they received in the past 12 months, "61% received help from family, 12% from friends, 23% from the medical/community, and social services" (Slee, 2006, p. 47). Specifically, in relation to, "financial help 49% received from family, friends and neighbours, 25% from churches or charities, and 20% from government service agencies" (Slee, 2006, p. 47).

Financial circumstances have a major influence on children's life chances and outcomes. In financially disadvantaged families, children tend to fare poorly in terms of developmental progress compared with other children. For example, research based on, *Growing Up in Australia,* suggests that children aged 4–5 years from financially disadvantaged families are less likely than other children of the same age to be school-ready

in terms of their cognitive and social-emotional development (Baxter & Hand, *Executive Summary*, 2013, p. 17) but this is not the primary focus of this research study.

In Cowen's notion of wellbeing in today's society it is common to ask oneself, "Am I happy and content in my life, in my job and in my future aspirations?" While in countries like Australia the ability to have the time and space to engage in the luxury of reflection is seen as an entitlement, it is a very different experience for people from poor and developing countries. From today's perspective it is still relevant as a social indicator of success (Baxter & Hand, *Executive Summary*, 2013). During the 1980's people agreed with:

> objective indicators of people's wellbeing, such as economic progress and community engagement, are of less worth if they are unhappy ... the importance of subjective wellbeing as an indicator of progress ... A more informed view of wellbeing, then, uses both objective and subjective social indicators. (Baxter & Hand, 2013, p. 18)

Education today should be more than just an accumulation of skills; it should also benefit wellbeing.

Understanding Societal and Social Influences—Strategies Involving Communities

Society's structure and alongside it the challenges of health, education and care have changed. Australian society has diversified over the last 25 years and high levels of immigration has created concepts of diversity and change in family culture. There are a range of socio-economic, educational and language backgrounds (OECD, 2008; Andreson, Oades & Caputi, 2003, p. 17). These changes in the societal structure of Australia has meant that such concepts and responses to a culturally sensitive and diverse environment are essential and inclusive models of education and community efforts toward inclusion are crucial to progress the growing tapestry of people in Australia.

In response education in Australia has changed as well. People with disabilities often attend mainstream schools and receive supports—financial, aides, enabling participation in ECEC services, and programs at school. Many of these aim to provide skills for independent living (Andreson et al., 2003, OECD, 2008, p. 21). Fundamental changes in the Australian context and structure of society, particularly the workforce and family structure:

> like much of the Western world, has witnessed a change in the historical model of family relationships. In earlier generations women typically gave up paid employment during their young adult years to care for their young children full-time. By 2006 however, workforce participation rates of Australian women aged 18–44 had risen to 70%, compared to 84% for men of this age group. In 2006 over 50% of women with a child under the age of five were in the workforce; 16.2% of women with a child aged under five were employed full-time; and a further 35.5% employed part-time. (COAG, 2011, p. 9)

The change in the workforce with women working more during their child's early years and later life has meant there is a need for more accessible, affordable, ECEC services. In terms of facilitation and structure of these services involving families wherever possible is desirable. Single parents (usually but not always single mothers) may be employed part or full time. These families may or may not experience disadvantage at least in economic terms.

While, referring to human rights in Australia ECECs must, "take into account the views, interests and choices of children" (ACT Parliamentary Counsel, *Children and Young People Regulation*, 2009, p. 13) and in this, provide children with a voice. Relating to Indigenous Australians the Parliamentary Counsel maintains that, "without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession". The Counsel asserts that, "The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgement that Indigenous peoples are Australia's first people" (Perso, 2012, p. 9). While embedding this concept of self-determination in these population groups, this application can be translated similarly to other individuals or all groups, who have the right to navigate their experience and become self-determining and empowered individuals.

Socio-Economic Factors

Commonly in literature in this field, "education is seen as critical for economic wellbeing, and there is an increasing emphasis on lifelong learning as an organising framework. Schools and their leaders have had to become innovative in responding to new social and economic demands" (OECD, 2008; Andreson et al., p. 16). The cycle of disadvantage for countries, communities, families and individuals can be reversed, through a successful educational intervention, through an ECEC experience. While supporting value-based thinking, services and funding that match professional development opportunities and

involve families is key to, "the economic or productivity argument for investing in the early years" (Liddell et al., 2011, viii).

Concluding Remarks

All families with children attending an ECEC service bring with them a wide variety of values, beliefs, experiences and needs. It is the responsibility of the ECEPs to ensure that the environment and programs they provide can meet the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families who may be experiencing events or stresses which may cause these relationships to deteriorate. These families may become vulnerable. It is these vulnerable families who require intensive and responsive support from ECEPs to address their needs effectively.

The Victorian Government policy definition of vulnerability (2013) provides context for my research and my research resonates with this official documentation.

The Victorian Government (2009) states that:

> Early Childhood Safety, Stability and development are the foundations for learning, behaviour and health in the Early Years of life and throughout their school years into adulthood. Children who have negative experiences in their first 3 years of life can have long lasting effects on brain development and are more likely to experience behavioural and learning problems, substance abuse, involvement in crime, poor physical health and practice poor parenting. Conversely, positive nurturing experiences, including participation in quality early years services, enhance children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual wellbeing.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research project sought to understand the current work of educators and professionals working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families and the views of families and children who participate in ECEC settings. The researcher sought to discover the answer to the research question: ***What are the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children, including those with disabilities and their families, in accessing, maintaining engagement and successfully learning and developing within an educational program?*** The research design was qualitative and phenomenological and explored the lived experience and understandings of ECEPs, children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, and how they negotiate everyday experiences. This involved a contextualising survey, semi-structured interviews for all participants and the analysis of children's drawings. It relied on a reflection of an ecological and sociocultural perspective and the environments or contexts of children and families at risk, representing a part of their being in the world (Heidegger, 1962), and concerns the perceptions and identifications of social engagements (Durkheim, 1938; Weber & Mitchell 1995). This phenomenological study sought deep understandings of the lived social world of participants. Figure 7 denotes each phase of the research methodology and indicates the correlating facets of each phase.

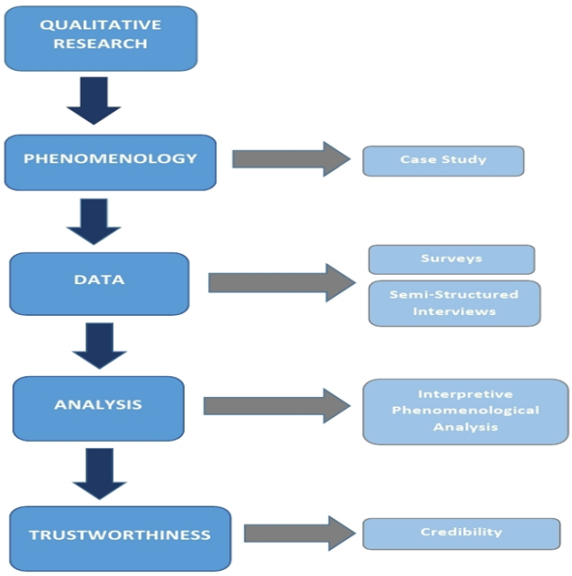


Figure 7 Research methodology structure

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and methodology. Phenomenological analysis remains "faithful to the original" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 95) and is humanistic in that it accepts, "meanings, meaning-intention and meaning-fulfilment" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 66) and explores how social life is constructed by those who live in it. Inquiring is, "socially driven and evidenced in relationships" (Denscombe, 2010). It, "is only in the life of action, that humans become fully authentic" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 342). Husserl (1970) states that, research must be unbiased, intentional, and the researcher must bracket their assumptions and performed epoché. Gadamer, a hermeneutic phenomenologist, believed that bracketing was to understand and be aware of one's own bias so that the text can present itself in its own truth which stands against one's own meaning, understanding or prejudices" (Gadamer, 1979). The researcher remained open and unbiased implementing the process of bracketing.

Exploratory Research Aims

Wilson (1998, p. 334), a renowned biologist said it best when he wrote, "we are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom". This research aimed toward better strategies in professional development and training opportunities, service design and delivery, collaborative, integrated, and flexible approaches to implementation, planning, curriculum, policy making, and responses anticipating better support for children and their families.

Aim of Analysis

The aim of the analysis was to explore the life-worlds of ECEPs and the children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage with whom they worked. Particularly important was the role communication could play in relationships that are at the core of the intersecting lives of my participants. Mapping this social world, involves understanding the process between, for instance, an individual and the relationship they form in their environment (context). Each process is different but when using a grouping (a stakeholder group) that shares a common understanding or focus it is possible to keep both this uniqueness and yet affirm where complexities; thoughts, emotions and beliefs may be similar. The expertise of the researcher guides the process. The knowledge of the participants is twofold, for ECEP's, they are represented as having knowledge, skills and understanding of the field in which they work, and represent a good stakeholder group to assess, understand and analyse this phenomena. For families their understanding comes from their everyday lives

with their children and surrounds, their motivations for their child and their support, education and care.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has, "a concern with meanings and the way people understand things and a concern with patterns of behaviour and is a basis for information gathering and generalising theories" (Denscombe, 1998, pp. 207–208). Qualitative research is a methodology that is reliant on the reflection of the:

> innerworlds of, [in this case, the ECEPs] and how they understand their role and problems that they face on a daily basis. Qualitative research seeks out this understanding deliberately. The more pure quantitative research more easily pinpoints specific data to test a hypothesis but falls short in being able to understand the social experience. (Pianta et al., 2001, p. 132)

The research design is qualitative and phenomenological which is in part collaborative within the social structure and the experience between researcher and those analysed as part reflective and dynamic linked closely with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological perspective.

This study sought on the ground practitioner understanding to improve strategies in professional development and training opportunities, service design and delivery. This involved collaborative and flexible approaches to implementation, planning, curriculum responses, policy-making and effective responses, with and for vulnerable and disadvantaged families, aiming toward enhancing the support of children at risk. In, "using a participatory approach … the process itself was successful … in reaching qualitative authentic responses and solutions from the first-hand knowledge of those working with vulnerable children and encouraging open dialogue among diverse stakeholders" (Pianta et al., 1999, p. 119). Social research involves the, "deliberate study of other people for the purposes of increasing understanding and/or adding to knowledge" (Dawson, 2009, p. 9).

Qualitative approaches to research have the ability to provide rich, deep descriptions of how people experience any given phenomena. Choosing a phenomenological approach to the study assisted the researcher in discovering the lived experience. Phenomenology deals with the ways that people interpret events and literally how they make sense of their personal

experiences as, "every form of human awareness is interpretative" (Phenomenology Online, p. 1). Phenomenology is particularly interested in how social life is constructed by those who participate in it.

Principles of Qualitative Data Analysis—Paradigm

Qualitative data analysis is iterative, and an evolving process and the process itself can be collaborative, meaning derived from this process becomes greater than the imminent text of the moment. It is inductive, "analysis [that] tends to work from the particular to the general circumscribing from the practical to the theoretical and is research-centred; the values and experiences of the researcher as factors influencing analysis" (Denscombe, 2003, p. 273). As Van Manen (1997, p. 15) points out, "Practice (or life) always comes first and theory comes later as a result of reflection ... a process of *Bildung*." Looking at the lived experience of the frontline of early childhood education and their perspective, is important, as they have practised or been part of the, "life understanding of early childhood education" (Van Manen, p. 21).

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative and uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) that offers, a research framework that, "explores personal perceptions of experience to discover how individuals make sense of their social world" (Nunnerley, Hay-Smith & Dean, 2013, p. 1165), and what this interpretation means. IPA focuses on how the processes of interpretation are shared and socially constructed (Denscombe, 2003). Applying a Foucaultian lens, my participants are individuals who are, "capable of working on themselves to achieve new kinds of existence … [and who have the] capacity for both resistance and transformation" (Murphy, 2013, p. 21). This notion is pivotal to this research study.

The process of understanding the inner-worlds of participants encompasses cultural, social and theoretical perspectives. At the same time, it emphasises that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process. Using IPA allowed data collected to focus on individuals who have their own framework—their understanding of their social world and being part of this social world. For the researcher, their preconceived notions of their own social world, recognises its "intentionality and is part of a collaborative process of understanding between researcher and those analysed" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 273). IPA looks into subjective human experience and these existential human experiences

and the individual are subject to environmental influences and represents an, "existential phenomenological perspective" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. Intro).

Data Analysis—Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) uses a lived experience approach harnessed in this research study by looking through the eyes of the coalface of education, families and children, participating in early childhood services. IPA explores the social map of the world, which comes through participants' experiences and relationships and how they integrate these into their understandings (Vygotsky, 1978). Both researcher and participant must be aware that they come with their own beliefs and understandings. For the researcher they must be aware of their own "intent" (p. 273). This aligns with an interpretive approach, which has the capacity to capture the rich details from the individuals interviewed and provide opportunities for detailed microanalysis, of people's experiences, rather than more descriptive approaches, such as Giorgi (1997), who uses third person narrative, and a more generalised macro analysis. IPA analysis highlights, "consciousness and the life-worlds of the individual" (Willig, 2001).

IPA offers a, "framework for research, [while] explor[ing] personal perceptions of experience to discover how individuals make sense of their social world" (Nunnerley et al., 2013, p. 1165). It does not come with the desire to discover the answer to a hypothesis rather to investigate a social meaning. The main currency for an IPA study is the meanings, particular experiences, events, and states held for participants. IPA also emphasises that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process.

IPA's emphasis on sense-making by both participant and researcher means that it can be described as having cognition as a central analytic concern, and this suggests an interesting theoretical alliance with the cognitive paradigm that is dominant in contemporary psychology. IPA shares with the cognitive psychology and social cognition approaches in social and clinical psychology (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), a concern with mental processes. IPA strongly diverges from mainstream psychology when it comes to deciding the appropriate methodology for such questions. IPA employs in-depth qualitative analysis that is committed to the exploration of meaning and sense-making.

On reliability and validity IPA holds the, "assumption that, as a dynamic process, analysis is an interpretative activity, with recognition that the researcher plays a role in

producing their own understanding of an interviewee's account" (Meek, 2007, p. 137). To maintain reliability a range of data and a range of participant answers could be collected to gain a rich perspective of lived experiences, in this case, those of ECEPs, families and their children, who may be experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. On a practice level leaving research exploration, data and focus open to interpretation and understanding served to ensure the research, "remain[ed]... unbiased …leaving the lens open to the discovery of new and unplanned truths" (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 486).

Again the relationship between the researcher and participant was deliberative in such that the researcher was aware of any of their own biases and prejudices and subjective beliefs before they entered into the process of research and analysis. A good phenomenological description, "validates" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 27). Lincoln and Guba's (1986) definitions of having trustworthiness and validity, but with specific rules, are different from applicability specifically to qualitative methodology. Traditionally scientific rigour contains internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. In IPA research new rigours of validity are summarised as:

> fairness, when it is based on values, and notes that different value systems might occur. Also ontological authentication involves an evolving notion of self for all participants. It is educative and increases understanding and [is] catalytically authentic as it inspires action. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 73–84)

Phenomenological Methodology

Van Manen (1997) discussed phenomenology as a process of validation. Phenomenological research methodology is two-fold both within the life-world of the researcher and the context of those that are being understood, and analysed. Phenomenology is constructed by those who participate in it and, "stems from a philosophical concern with the nature of *Being-in-the-world"* (Heidegger, 1962). The lived experience of human beings within the *"life-world"* (Husserl, 1970) accepts contradictions, complexities and ambiguity.

Husserl (1970) notes that, "before practice can occur reflection is necessary and calls this process *Bildung*" (p. 15). The theoretical approach used in this study was a, "socio-constructivist approach" that was derived from Vygotsky's work (1978), emphasising the co-construction of understandings between participants. Vygotsky identified the importance of the role of the social and cultural context in children's development. This social and cultural

context included the impact of family and community on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Phenomenology is the, "uncritical application of traditionally defined realities such as the psychic, consciousness, continuity of lived experience, reason" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 272). Of interest is the notion of plurality that, "stands against mass homogenisation of society" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 342). This plurality, or within this research context diversity of experience further strengthens the individual context in that a variety of experiences and opportunities can be a positive sense of social experience. In this way education can be used as a place, an experience and a context. Understanding, John-Steiner and Mahn's (1996), "functional systems" (p. 194) in the way, the cognitive world is impacted by its environment and everyday existence, is such, that the essence or understanding of self becomes a negotiation between, an interplay of experience, and the understanding of this experience. Also, continuity and particularly transition, important in the early years is about a set of constructs in which experiences are being absorbed by the person. According to Moran and Mooney (2002) it is, "the true meaning of text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process and new source of understanding" (p. 331).

Dasein is an understanding of Being, engendered through an act of understanding*"* *(*Moran & Mooney, 2002). Dasein possesses an intentionality in its purpose for the researcher and awareness of, "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitutes the historical reality of his being" (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 321). This research context encompasses a diversity of experiences that can potentially strengthen the individual context and opportunities that can be a positive sense of social experience.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a type of knowing in which:

> understanding meanings gives rise to a historical hermeneutic way of knowing or communicative knowledge (the knowing that results from engagement, interrelationship and dialogue with others) ... there is an interest in being emancipated, a free agent as it were, which issues in a 'critical', or 'self-reflective' way of knowing (the knowledge that comes ultimately from knowing oneself). (Murphy, 2013, pp. 71–72)

Hermeneutics is a core tenet of IPA that was originally developed for qualitative psychological research (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Shaw, 2001; Willig, 2008). IPA aims to explore the unique meanings that people assign to a certain experience, as well as examine how those meanings relate to the person's individual and cultural context, and to the experiences of others (Shaw, 2001; Hood, 2015, p. 6).

There is also a hermeneutic emphasis in IPA, which relates to the double act of interpretation necessary to get an insider's perspective on the phenomenon in question. In other words, researchers are people trying to make sense of people trying to make sense of their own experiences. For example, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) apply the idea of the Heidegger hermeneutic circle to the research process, pointing out that it rarely (if ever) involves a simple, linear movement from data to results. Instead, they posit a reflexive and dynamic process of engagement, "with the researcher's own aims, theories and preconceptions, as well as with participants and their accounts of lived experience" (Hood, 2015, p. 6).

Phenomenology focuses on the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of the study, how we come to know the world around us and in different levels (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A constructivist paradigm is a subjective epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Subjectivity is an inevitable part of understanding a phenomenon and reality is constructed and reconstructed through a process of social interaction, as in the views and beliefs of the educators and professionals, children and families this study focuses on (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, has become more and more commonly used as a research methodology. It attempts to get beneath subjective understandings to uncover the nature of experience as realised by the individual (Kafle, 2001). Hermeneutic phenomenology analyses the social world through attempting to make sense of the interrelationships of beings and these relationships are complex. Many aspects are brought into the negotiation of a particular social experience and this is a part of researching the social world (Heinenan-Pieper, 1989; Goldstein, 1994; Heldrick, 1994; King, 1994; Allen-Meares, 1995). Hermeneutic phenomenology as understood by Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1979) is an interpretative research method (rather than purely descriptive). Heidegger argues that all description is interpretative and this is part of every form of human awareness (Laverty, 2003). This aligns with an ontological understanding about the nature of the social world and

its reality. The constructivist paradigm assumes, "a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities)" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 27) and such research explores "the essence of the phenomenon under investigation ... in a context specific setting" (Patton, 2002, p. 39), which in this case study, involves educators, professionals, children and families within ECEC settings.

Rationale for Using Phenomenological Methodology

When looking at the appropriateness and vigour of qualitative methodology and in particular phenomenology, it is important to understand that its criteria and the relevance of this is understood and credible upon a different set of expectations and purposes. Not seeking a precision of answers, and/or specific result, rather an intention to see into the social world and that which is under analysis. Calculable by a different set of principles within the same validity that quantitative research requires.

Such factors as:

> credibility (validity), trust, vigour, generalisability (external validity), objectivity and robustness can still be applied to qualitative research through understanding to that which it is and responds… tends to be socially driven and this construct rather than derivative of a specific outcome is manifest in relationships and those that interrelate between researcher and those analysed. (Denscombe, 2010, p. 298)

The inner world of psychological formation in the construction of symbols (Vygotsky) is a process of internalisation and part of the process within which qualitative research resides.

Ethics

Approval was gained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) (see Appendix A), the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (see Appendix B), and the permission of the Manager of Knox City Council (see Appendix C) was sought. With agreement, the Manager forwarded the explanatory statement, consent form and invitation to invite all staff in the service to undertake the online survey.

Given the situation of family participants and the nature of the cultural and social sensitivities addressed in this study, support through the onsite Counselling and Family

Support Services (as outlined in the explanatory statements) were offered to all participants should they have felt adversely affected, during/post participation.

Participants

The Manager of Family and Children's Services Department at Knox Council invited ECEPs at Knox Council ECEC Services to participate in the study by distributing the explanatory statement and asking those interested to contact the student researcher. It was important to seek out the lived experience perspective of those who are at the frontline of the early years services as they are best placed to identify understandings from this perspective.

- Group 1 consisted of 33 qualified (varying levels Diploma to PhD and some of which holding leadership positions) ECEPs working at the Knox Council Early Childhood Services. This included all ECEPs—pre-school, childcare, family day care, playgroup, and early childhood intervention educators and early childhood professionals and maternal and child health nurses, inclusion support facilitators, preschool field officers/early years consultants and other allied health professionals—who were currently working with vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children and families. This group participated in an online survey and semi–structured interview/s.

- Group 2 consisted of 30 Families/parents/carers of Group 2 (Families/parents/carers attended singularly or at times as a couple or group). This group participated in an online survey and semi–structured interview/s.

- Group 3 consisted of 53 children who are existing clients of Knox Council Early Childhood Services. This group participated in drawing and the associated narrative/statements were transcribed.

- 116 participants in total

Recruiting participants and collecting the data.

Group 1 - ECEPs: Once ethical approval was gained from MUHREC and the DEECD, ECEPs at Knox Council Early Childhood Services were invited to participate in an interview (with the possibility of a second interview for clarification). The Manager of Family and Children's Services Department at Knox Council forwarded information (Explanatory

Statement) about the study to staff. Potential participants were asked to contact the researchers if they wished to participate using the mobile number of the student researcher. When they contacted the student researcher they were sent a consent form and after that a mutually convenient time and place (public) was arranged. If preferred the interview could be by phone. The interview took about 40-50 minutes with the possibility of asking for a second follow up interview to clarify any information that was needed.

Group 2 – The Families/parents/carers: The families of children who are in Group 3 were invited to take part in an interview at a mutually convenient public location. These families already had the basic information about the study so that their child could be invited. They were given a new explanatory statement and their own consent form. The interview with families/parents/carers took about 40-50 minutes with the possibility of asking for a second follow up interview to clarify any information that was needed.

Group 3 – The Children: Children are attending an ECEC program such as a preschool, childcare, family day care or play group and/or multiple programs. Children who were involved in the Boronia, Bayswater and The Basin (BBB) Project may currently be attending an early childhood program. The student researcher asked the director or manager of the particular early childhood program to speak to families in this program to invite them to participate via a flyer. If they were interested, the families of the children could contact the researcher either electronically, by mobile phone or by passing a message to the manager of that particular facility. The student researcher responded and explained the study, with an Explanatory Statement, and asked them to Consent to their child being invited to take part. If all agreed, the student researcher attended the early childhood program and asked the child if they wished to be involved in a study. The child was given an age suitable consent form. The researcher then asked them a couple of questions about how they feel about coming to their specific [kinder/childcare/play group/family day care/early intervention] named service and to draw a picture of their specific [kinder/childcare/play group/family day care/early intervention] named service.

Case Studies

The most common form of phenomenological inquiry is a case study. Case studies collect and evaluate data, describe and interpret a phenomenon. This phenomenological study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of early childhood ECEPs' lived experiences

in working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families, and the meanings and understanding of what they viewed were their roles, and what this meant to them. These case studies were undertaken at Knox City Council services. The researcher was aware of the extensive work undertaken by Knox in this area and believed that these services would be in many ways representative of the Victorian population. The data analysis involved three data sources: an online contextualising survey, children's drawings and semi-structured interviews.

Online Survey

Surveys are considered a, "research strategy not a research method" (Denscombe, 1998, p. 7). By using surveys, it is possible to identify the, "lived experience of participants and this strategically can be used to map the social world" (pp. 6–7). A broad range of ECEPs were asked to complete a contextualising online survey to establish length of service and experience, knowledge in working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families, and their understanding of the barriers and enablers to families' engagement and participation in ECECs. The surveys provided information about staff demographics, children and family demographics engaged with the service, knowledge and use of referral pathways and processes, educator and professional support needs, training, professional development and networking requirements. The surveys focused on vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families via Survey Monkey.

Children's Drawings and Explanations

Families accessing Knox Council ECEC services were invited to participate in an interview (with the possibility of a second interview for clarification). Some of the interview questions were of a sensitive/personal nature. The families consented to their child being invited to take part in the children's drawing activity. The children's drawings were based around types of themes discussed with the children include their feelings of being Happy, Sad and/or Angry when they come to or are playing at, kinder/childcare/play group/family day care/early intervention, and when they are with their family. The image-based data in this research refers to the child responding to questions in the form of drawings as text. The researcher is part of the interactive process involving the relationship between text and analysis. For interpreting image, *"cultural artefact…* the value of the image is in what lies behind the surface appearance" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 293).

Children's Drawings as Data

In drawing images participants often express experiences and emotions more easily than in words (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Gillies, Harden, Johnson, Reavey, Strange & Willig, 2005; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Radley & Taylor, 2003a, 2003b). Weber and Mitchell (1995) contend that to the qualitative researcher, "drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet thought through" (p. 34). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) present metaphors (including visual metaphors) as, "one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally, our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness" (p. 193). In their view, metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill increasing rapport and … communicating the nature of unshared experience" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 232). Also, "language, identity, morality and ethics, occurs through neurological connections and as [young] children [are] full of fast growth it is [a] time for children to explore their world and make connections between self and their environment" (Nevills & Wolfe, 2009; Rushton, Rushton & Larkin, 2010).

The student (child) responds in image-based analysis through an unconscious, or psychological experience, of an inner reality in which they are only in part aware. Images do not contain, "one right meaning … open to interpretation … the meaning as given within a particular culture, within a given time, within a social context, within which was produced" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 293). Within the process becomes a deliberation and even awareness of those who are involved, both researcher and student, representing a process of evolving understanding. Both parties result in an illuminated perspective.

When undertaking research with children there are important ethical considerations. Children's drawings, are based on their, "perceptions, and not the researchers recognising that there are some ways in which research with children differs from research with adults" (Dockett & Perry, 2005, p. 9). Smith, Monaghan and Broad (2002) conclude that, "participatory research is beneficial both because of its implicit values (such as empowerment and inclusion) and also because it improves our level of understanding of the substantive subject area" (p. 2). A key challenge is ensuring that those involved in research are empowered to make a difference whilst at the same time ensuring that studies remain academically robust (Cleaver, 2001; Lushey & Munro, 2015).

In this study it is important to include and respect the voice of children. This is an ethical imperative. It is noted that individuals and children, can act upon and shape their own identities. This means that, we are not only shaped by our environment, but we can also determine our identities and actions. The attitude and approach of the researcher, particularly in studies with children, is important. The philosophy of the life-world, "advocates a comprehensive view of humans, expressed as openness and humility to the participants' experiences... addressing the whole being" (Alerby, 2015, p. 24). Brown and Johnson's book *Children's Images of Identity: Drawing the Self and the Other* (2015) aptly describes that, "the importance of connection to place has particular significance…. The sharing of stories and experiences… These relationships we have with the living worlds [should be] strongly reflected in our personal respect for [diverse] cultures and the ways in which … people … engage with their own special places" (p. ix). The place and space being ECEC settings in this study.

Once, "the researcher has collected data these notes are ... transformed ... into emerging themes or concepts" (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011, p. 313). Subsequently the data is analysed into, "emerging themes clustering them together according to conceptual similarities. The clusters [are] given a descriptive label which conveys the conceptual nature of the themes in each cluster" (p. 315). Once again, the data is detailed and organised after it is collected to ensure the researcher leaves the data open to represent itself as it is, without bias. This approach is intentional and deliberate.

The notion of connection is key to this study's findings around relationships and meaning-making and human beings as sharing together (Brown & Johnson, 2015). The child drawings can be viewed from a contextualised place or space. After the drawings took place the data was sorted into themes, categories or clusters, which will be discussed in the children's chapter. While drawing the images a narrative occurred between child participant and researcher who transcribed comments. The role of the researcher involves the sharing of power and experience, allows collaboration in the research study, through engaging in the discussion during the process (Milner & O'Bryne, 2009). Children's drawings can show the expression of the child's view (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Veale, 2005; Einarsdóttir, Dockett & Perry, 2009).

Sometimes reality within drawings is seen as more important than symbolic (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009, p. 218). Within the inner world when, "focusing on drawing as

meaning-making moves away from the discourse of drawing as representational and, instead, focuses on children's intentions, considers the process of drawing, and recognises children's drawings as purposeful" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009, p. 218). Meaning can be determined within its context (Brown & Johnson, 2015) and is, "shared and constructed between all participants in a research study" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009, p. 219). Images draw on experience and simultaneously, "evoke the invisible, feelings and experiences that may not be representable in language" (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011, p. 319). Drawings can contain images that allow a "safe bridge" to represent feelings (Lyddon, Clay & Sparks, 2001; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009).

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview data was collected first without having themes and this was done deliberately and intentionally, to let the data speak for itself. The data findings and their analysis were left open-ended without any preconceived notions as to what the data would reveal. Resonating with the phenomenological underpinning of this study the interview data was collected and analysed using IPA, which involves reading and re-reading transcripts, coding emergent themes, grouping clusters of themes, and then generating over-arching themes.

In IPA the researcher, "should aim to provide a close textual reading of the participant's account moving between description and different levels of interpretation, at all times clearly differentiating between them" (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 488). Again the relationship between the researcher and participant was deliberative in such that the researcher was aware of any of her own biases and prejudices and subjective beliefs before she entered into the process of research and analysis. The researcher has experience and expertise in the field of community services, early childhood and family services. This means that this understanding with those taking part in the interviews, encouraged empathetic, conversational engagement between participants and the researcher (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). The data collection revealed deep rich insights from individuals about their life experience. The lens of the interviewer (the researcher) remained open and unbiased. Being mindful of suspending one's own life experience, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, as well as using their training and expertise in sensitively questioning to gain insight into the participants life experience and expose the enablers and barriers for them in an ECEC setting including factors that are influential. Participants also bring their own lifeworld, perceptions, self-agency, learning and resiliency to the process. For them the protective and risk factors,

relationships with their family and friends, and the early childhood and community environments were significantly important themes. The researcher's data collection approach in the semi–structured interviews highlighted those themes encapsulated in Figure 8.

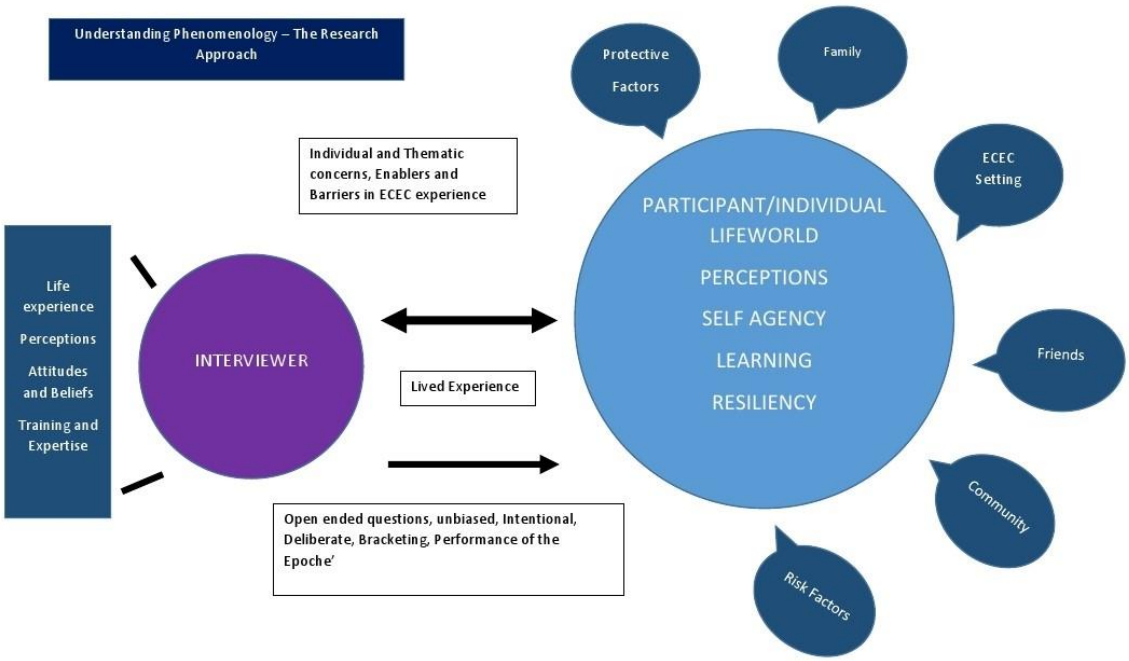


Figure 8 Data collection

Concluding Remarks

My research design is qualitative and phenomenological. Qualitative research approaches have the ability to provide rich, deep descriptions of how people experience any given phenomena. As this research sought to explore lived-experience, a phenomenological approach was chosen. The researcher was satisfied with this methodology as an effective, relevant and appropriate qualitative methodological approach.

Phenomenology is particularly interested in how social life is constructed by those who participate in it and phenomenology, particularly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) focuses on how the processes of interpretation are shared and socially constructed (Denscombe, 2003). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has fulfilled the purpose and expectation of the researcher.

CHAPTER 5: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AND PROFESSIONALS DATA

Introduction

All the participant early childhood educators and professionals (ECEPs) recognised that families can have the strongest influences on a child's learning, development and wellbeing. Positive relationships between families and ECEPs are essential and require effective communication to build collaborative partnerships. The establishment of trust and empathy can lead to effective collaboration, engagement and the development of genuine connections. It is essential that ECEPs are well equipped to manage contemporary challenges and issues relating to working with vulnerable children and their families. Professional learning is seen as important, particularly knowledge and skills around adult engagement, relationship building and learning better ways to communicate with families. It seems apparent that ECEPs would like further training to support processes that might be difficult or challenging particularly in communicating with families. The role of ECEPs is complex and professionals must have extensive knowledge and skills and a caring attitude to understand and support the broad ranging needs of children and their families facing adversity and living in stressful, under-resourced and isolated circumstances that may affect family functioning. In an ECEC setting it is essential to support children's learning, development and wellbeing. In this research clear examples emerged in the ECEC settings, where educators and professionals were providing excellent inclusive environments to reach out to vulnerable families and monitor and support children's wellbeing, learning and development, providing positive educational outcomes for these children and their families.

Demographics

To summarise, thirty-three ECEPs who worked in a number of early years services across preschools, childcare centres (occasional and long day care), family day care, early childhood intervention, inclusion support services, preschool field officer program, and maternal and child health centres in the Knox Municipality were given a survey and participated in semi-structured interviews. This Municipality has been committed to supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged families in a variety of ways. My participants included maternal child and health nurses, early childhood educators, early childhood

intervention workers and allied health professionals, including speech pathologists, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, early years' consultants/preschool field officers, and inclusion support facilitators. While all roles promote safety, care, support, advocacy and education for children, the participants are also committed to developing positive relationships with families as it is thought that this is very helpful in supporting children.

This study asked the participants to identify and discuss the enablers and barriers at the coalface of ECEC. As will be evident, the foremost responses from ECEPs about their experiences working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families identified issues such as relationships, the feelings and perceptions of families, communication and some uncertainty about the most effective approaches to use. A family-centred strengths-based approach enhances the knowledge and skills of parents and others working together to meet the needs of the child (Bruder, 2010; Dunst, 2007), that values diversity, encourages empowerment and is based around humanitarian rights, always focussed on the child and the provision of a sound early years beginning.

This requires giving children time and creating a caring environment where they feel safe and protected, and can be provided with solid foundations and the opportunity to build resilience. In the recent Department of Education and Training (DET) audit, the high quality ratings achieved in the Knox Early Years Services and the low turnover ratio of ECEPs suggests a genuine enjoyment of their work and a commitment to quality service provision for children and families across the board, which in itself is an enabler. High quality services and staff job satisfaction ensures better outcomes for children and families that no policy, planning or development in isolation could achieve. Participant responses coalesced around training, relationships, family engagement, protective and resilience factors for children.

Findings

Before discussing the overall findings from the participants, I will present the understandings of one participant who spoke about all of the issues raised. The educator has been working as a preschool teacher in the [name] suburb for the last three years after having completed a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education followed by a Bachelor Degree at University. Her work is varied, and encompasses many aspects and roles in the early years including educational leadership. She has direct involvement in running training sessions with

her educational team, oversees general day-to-day running of the centre, is actively involved with committees, specifically supporting her centre's committee, deals with occupational health & safety, emergency management, administration and sessions with the children including her planning and programming for this—what she calls her "behind-the-scene stuff". The educator continually reflects upon her professional development and training needs, in relation to her role and updates her skills accordingly. She possesses incredible practice wisdom and, like many other of the ECEPs who work in the field at Knox Council, she experiences feelings of general enjoyment of her work. From analysing the profiles of the ECEP participants in the survey, many had worked in the field, for an extended period of time, some up to thirty years. Low turn-over rates are an enabler in many ways; retaining a long term staff member such as this participant, provides consistency for families and allows the organisation to reduce knowledge loss and to benefit from her substantial experience, practice wisdom and general satisfaction in her job. During her interview the educator covered all of the issues raised by all the participants. She discussed the barriers that children and their families experience in the day-to-day. These included cultural issues, transport, the general situation at home and family life overall, all of which contributed to stressful situations. Specifically, she mentioned mental health issues and financial concerns, noting that council supported access to such services which are particularly valuable. This educator has a long track record of successfully working with children and their families who are in challenging circumstances. The educator talked about the importance of professional development (PD). At the time of her interview she said that although there was some PD available, more would be welcomed.

The educator identified the main enablers experienced by her vulnerable children, families and co-workers. She pointed out that she and her team make a really big effort from the beginning to build strong, trusting relationships because "the more families begin to trust you, the more likely they are to open up to you." With respect and a trusting relationship families become more, "willing to take on board any advice or support that you may have." The relationships that she builds to allow children and their families to find a safe place are paramount. This is, "not just for children that we provide a safe secure stable environment here with predictable routines but also for the mothers and families". This is vital for mothers and children who are experiencing family violence. She further elaborated that, "strong relationships with families at our services support their children's learning and development".

It can be argued that underpinning all successful relationships is effective communication, which begins with small steps and acts of faith. The educator explained that:

> sometimes, well very often, it's hard to turn that corner with vulnerable families, how do we start, how are we going to break the ice to communicate and connect well with these families, to not make them feel embarrassed or judged or feel put on the spot and how do we then ensure they are not feeling isolated and they are feeling engaged with staff at the service.

The educator qualified this assertion explaining that even when she knows a family very well and they know her very well, there can still be difficulties. It is constantly on her mind that she has, "to be cautious, to read the feelings and experiences of the parents well, and to understand what is important for their child and family and the significant issues faced in their lives". Ultimately, she wants families, "to have open communication and feel comfortable and safe here and to feel they can trust the staff". This is not easy and the process takes time. There has to be a sharing so that the journey is, "mutual, a two-way street between family and educator", and this relies completely on having effective communication.

The educator stressed that, "there can be a lack of communication at times between external supporting agencies" and sometimes, there "can be various issues that you're completely unaware of". Strong communication and streamlining of services are essential so that, "everyone's working together to best support the child and the family. She stated on several occasions that, "there's a bit of a gap there at the moment ... we can feel a bit isolated at times … it would be nice if there was some kind of streamlining". Her broad-ranging discussion about the enablers and barriers in her role in working with vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children reflects her experience in the field. She was at all times positive and reflective.

All ECEP Participants

My participants explained that the first and most crucial issue for the families is stable housing because, "they're constantly moving, it's very hard for them to be involved in any programs". One participant explained that, "families may not be in one location long enough to identify and locate available support facilities and programs". Another participant explained that these families, "may come a few times and then drop out if you don't stay closely linked in and follow up with them to show care and concern if they don't attend".

Basic knowledge of what support is available is sometimes missing as one participant explained, "a lot of the families don't realise if you have a health care card, [then] the preschool inoculation is free". It was also pointed out that housing was becoming increasingly unaffordable. As a participant stated, "the cost is going up and there is a very high push towards changing housing". Further single houses are now being turned into multiple unit dwellings with limited space and access to play areas amongst other issues. Once housing is secured transport becomes the next major problem depending on the mobility of children and their families. For those children and their families, once they have a residential base, and if they have been able to identify services and programs, their next problem is how to get there to use the facilities. For example, families with several small children may find catching public transport a challenge. These three factors, housing, identifying resources, and transport are intertwined.

The participants identified a range of complicating factors. For example, children and their families may be unemployed and/or facing financial hardship. The instance of refugees and migrants who are not permitted to work, or who are not able to find work, and earn money was noted repeatedly. One educator participant noted, "financial issues heavily impact on a child and family's sense of belonging and inclusion and feeling like they fit in". There are some families who have, "limited money and this affects their ability to buy necessary items such as food, clothing, shoes and a bag and lunchbox for preschool". Another respondent added, "some families experience difficulties in providing the basic needs such as having food for their children and that would need to take priority over paying to come to childcare". An ECEP added that there was a financial barrier as, "the cost of a service would be a major thing" and it was seen to:

> affect access issues and feelings of being included and/or excluded and that 'free services' meant that a child and family felt less stigma and were more easily able to adjust to a program and meet with other parents on an equal footing.

Families may also have experienced trauma in the past, which may make them feel insecure and anxious about seeking help from governmental agencies; they may lack trust in services. Families can have further problems, such as mental illness, physical mobility issues, drug and alcohol dependency. Another participant pointed out that, "children may have additional needs such as being on the autism spectrum and this impacts on the way they behave", and at times the pressure on families leads to, "a very high percentage of breakdown

in parental relationships, so they're very often single parents, and that makes life even more hard for them". The ECEP participants described these factors as being common, multiple and complex, and one referred to them as, "the usual whole variety of things that can impact on families and then a whole lot more". Another described the factors for vulnerable families as, "take the challenges for a well-functioning family and times it by a hundred". These matters will be discussed in some detail in the following chapters. The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview data are representative of the following headings which will be discussed in turn: Working with Children, Working with Families and the Importance of Relationships—Trust, Empathy and Time, Collaborative Practices, and Professional Learning.

Working with Children

The ECEP participants spoke at length about the importance of putting the child and family at the centre of their work. One explained that her role was to, "care for the needs of the children, helping them with their milestones and development, and hopefully making them confident little people". Another noted the importance of recognising small achievements and explained that she looked for, "little milestone steps that they take, little words they might say—it may not seem like much, but for children with developmental issues, it's such a big step for them". With this recognition came the necessity of instilling confidence in the children and encouraging them to keep going. In relation to inclusive education and approaches one educator responded that, "children don't know what's going on for another child or their family so they can be very accepting and non-judgemental, depending on their own family values". Another participant argued that, "all children benefit when we create inclusive environments because then everyone can participate and feel connected to the service and it helps children understand and appreciate similarities and differences in other children and families and also in themselves". Worryingly one participant noted that some educators occasionally have:

> unfavourable, inappropriate attitudes toward children with, I'll just say issues, whether it be disability or behavioural related issues. Some have the attitude that if they don't fit under the normal category, they should be going to early childhood intervention or another setting, not a mainstream setting like childcare.

Specific barriers to inclusion can exist for children and their families. For example, external barriers might include a lack of money or clothing that reduces a family's sense of

fitting in. ECEPs mentioned the importance of all students and particularly those with disabilities, being treated equally. One ECEP spoke about children with disabilities being excluded from some social interactions, which meant that families and children were left feeling isolated, as they have not been able to engage more socially with other families outside day care like the rest of other children, who were getting birthday invitations. Marginalisation such as this should not be accepted in the ECEC setting. These attitudes can at times reduce a child's sense of agency, and hold a child back from experiencing an empathic learning environment. ECEPs are keen to foster inclusion and often talk about a joy, and the rewarding nature of their role. Sometimes the work can be overwhelming yet it is still rewarding. One ECEP noted, that sometimes the demands of their work pull them in different directions as they get caught up in those responsibilities, such as supervision and oversight, versus working individually with children, which is a hard act to bring together. At the end of the day the child's learning and development through the experiences and activities provided was central.

Many participants discussed the critical nature of being able to work effectively to promote, support and embrace cultural diversity and build respectful relationships. One respondent noted that, "as educators we all need to have the ability to understand, communicate and interact with people across all of the different cultures". Another respondent asserted that, "there must be support in the service to include all children no matter what their circumstance or background". Social inclusion was identified as a key enabler and for inclusive practices to be successful in the services, it was seen by most participants to mean accepting diversity, humanitarian principles, and maintaining value-based teaching approaches. As one educator stated, "understanding the culture of every family in my preschool is important and I need to be communicating and trying to identify with their norms and what is typical at home and in their daily practices". It was noted by this same educator that, "norms at home might be different, but this does not necessarily carry with it any implications or judgements, or stereotypes rather just understanding that each family is different, has its own dynamics and are not all the same". Another participant pointed out, "it's about providing a safe learning environment for children that is culturally sensitive" and another respondent added, "having conversations with parents about the expectations they have for their child in care and finding out what is important for them is necessary to respond appropriately to cultural diversity".

Visions and hopes were shared by participants around the desire for ECEPs to create a wondrous, joyful time of fun and play for these children and to enhance this time for families. Within the ECEC services there was an evident sense of good will toward the children and their families. It was identified in the interviews that ECEPs were happy in their jobs and that regardless of the challenges, they considered their everyday experience at work positive.

One participant noted that:

> Some of the families' lives are completely different and their family life is impacted by adverse experiences so you try very hard to do your best when you've got these more vulnerable children in care, you go above and beyond and do all you can to just make these children feel welcomed and cared for like all the other children.

Another respondent added, "this means having inclusive attitudes and values and responsive nurturing behaviours".

Strong trusting relationships were seen as the real point at which enablers and barriers buoy around and that creating positive and meaningful connections between ECEPs and families is crucial in achieving the best outcomes for the child. Each family and ECEP relationship comes with its own back-story. The family comes with varied knowledge, parenting wisdom and an understanding of their own child's needs. Families have aspirations for their children. The educator has knowledge of child development, learning, health and wellbeing, including how specific skills and practices can be used to support the child.

The importance of keeping children and their families safe, and supported was recognised by most respondents. Respecting their privacy and confidentiality and helping families focus on their own needs as parents, as well as the needs of their children is described as critical if families and children are to feel safe and supported. This is complex as it means that support and safety need to be established before families can open up and share their difficulties, their strengths and weaknesses, their motivations and desires for their child, and their stressors at home. The ECEC setting needs to provide a supportive, safe, nurturing and consistent environment for children where they can feel protected and have good reason to experience trust when these feelings may have been lost, or abused in the past. A respondent observed that:

> consistency is probably the most important aspect—children feeling safe, feeling cared for—it's the ultimate. You know, you get a child that's under stress at home, they need to be able to come here and leave that at home and just feel happy and safe here".

Another respondent added, "children can't learn, you can't expect them to thrive, you can't expect them to develop if they're not feeling safe and secure and parents must be able to have confidence that their children will be well cared for here". The literature and the data suggest that every ECEC setting and every relationship that takes place must be centred on the quality of the service and the working relationship with the child and family.

Across the range of participant responses the need for more time was consistently articulated, in the everyday, in planning, implementing, and evaluating strategies to support the individual educational needs of children at the service, and in establishing and maintaining communication with families. One participant noted, "the biggest barrier for me is time and not just time for the families but time that you have to split your attention between all the children". Supporting children with highly complex needs often requires more time from the ECEPs in the ECEC setting due to aspects such as social, emotional, health and wellbeing related issues, behavioural and/or developmental concerns. Many participants explained that engaging with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families can be challenging, complex and time intensive and that it is important to feel supported, well-resourced, and skilled to be able to give these children the very best start in life.

In working with young children, their key environments were seen as relational. Children learn through caring and nurturing relationships and it was noted as essential for their learning, wellbeing and development. As one respondent described, "the early years should be a place of imagination and rich learning where children can be curious and grow and envelop life with all its greatness". One participant asserted that, "every child deserves positive learning and life opportunities and it is our duty and absolute priority to ensure that each child receives this, whatever this takes". Many of the ECEPs expressed feelings such as, "experiencing enjoyment and gratification in their work" and feeling a sense of satisfaction and feeling they are, "making a difference in their work' by supporting children in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. While it was noted by one educator it was her, "passion to work with disadvantaged children and that it's important work". She qualified her enthusiasm with the recognition that, "childcare workers get much less money than other professions and more would work in this field if the money was there". Positive early childhood experiences

are essential in building a firm foundation for every child's future. Overall the participants expressed the belief that every day should be filled with opportunities for children to develop, learn and have fun, and to feel loved and valued.

Several educators commented on the challenges of accommodating all children in an inclusive program. One explained that:

> I don't feel like I have the experience to teach children with additional needs and vulnerabilities and I am unclear about how to reduce the behaviours I see in these children especially around their spending time alone, zoning out, being disengaged and the appearance of feeling isolated and separate from the rest of the children in the group.

Most participants agreed that, "sometimes as educators, we do not have the confidence, resources or time to work with high demands, children with additional needs and those that require lots of one on one attention and connection with the teacher".

Another participant expressed that:

> there is a lot more than I currently know about the care and educational needs of vulnerable children and I need to understand a whole lot more than I do right now to feel that I am making some inroads with the three children I have in my room.

An educator participant noted, "I would like to know more about how to work with children who are disruptive, angry and aggressive in the preschool and some more training in this area would be great".

Many participants spoke about the importance of relationships with children and their families and that when strong connections are established, they are usually built with attributes such as trust, empathy, and values-based approaches to relationships. While these factors occur naturally for some families and children for others they need to be developed. By understanding what works to help build these connections, what dispositions are more resilient and what family factors are protective we can then start to provide appropriate support. As one educator mentioned, "you've got to have supportive relationships with these children and their families and do whatever it takes to help them to feel secure and accepted"; this is a protective factor. It is important, "to get to know the children's interests very quickly

to get them engaged into the program". Teaching and guiding children about resilience and protective factors has been raised by a number of participants. One participant shared:

> It's important as educators that we support the social and emotional development of children and know how we can help them learn to be resilient and to understand and regulate their emotions and so by doing this, the children can experience a high degree of social and emotional wellness and successfully engage in their learning.

Another participant said, "it will be necessary to further understand, encourage and teach resilience strategies to children, and help families understand and apply protective strategies". An educator participant said, "resilience and social and emotional wellbeing is so important for children and sometimes we need to help them to develop it but we need to learn more about how to do it". This ECEC perspective was further discussed in terms of supporting children's resilience, social and emotional wellbeing and positive behaviour. Participants wanted more training in these areas, along with trauma-informed practice, to implement working with children at their respective centres. There was an overall sense of concern about not feeling adequately trained, while at the same time an expressed openness to embrace new learning and skill development to advantage vulnerable children and their families. One respondent confirmed that it was essential to refer to and learn from, "professionals with this expertise from other sectors like welfare/social workers, psychologists, mental health nurses" to better support children's social and emotional learning and development. Sharing of norms and values in the ECEC setting is essential but without an underlying ethos of care and inclusivity ECEPs may lack the vision, the values, and the beliefs to guide them in the work space and in the practical aspects of their day-to-day work.

Working with Families and the Importance of Relationships

As already asserted the relationships between ECEPs and families are critical. The findings from the educators and families were saturated around the notion of relationships, and they argued that this can be the key to success. As one participant stated, "the opportunity to maintain those relationships with families, I mean that's got to be the best, our best resources really". To accomplish this many participants agreed that, "adopting a strength-based family-centred approach and having one key person/key worker providing consistency for the family" was identified as most effective in meeting the aim of ECEP engagement with parents. Such practice, "develops positive, trusting and empowering relationships with

families" and, "working closely with the family and having meaningful and effective communication with them helps to keep us connected".

The connection between ECEPs and families was seen to aid in the engagement process, which was identified as a key enabler in keeping families included and actively participating in their child's education. A few participants observed that the relationship was sometimes hindered between ECEPs and families. Many participants mentioned the notion of a connection but found it hard to fully describe. Other participants felt it was easy for some to be more natural and develop a connection with families than for others. Most participants commented that they needed to find ways to develop this connection more effectively with vulnerable families and felt they needed more time to do this and these qualities could be taught and learnt. Relationships were seen as complex and based around uncertainties of thoughts, perceptions and feelings of families, yet it was still recognised across the board that establishing a good relationship, particularly when a real connection is established was the biggest enabler. Many participants explained that building stronger relationships with vulnerable families was complex as children and their families may be experiencing significant mental health issues, drug and alcohol misuse, and financial hardship where just surviving was the paramount concern.

The characteristics of connection were somewhat described by many participants and one noted, "it's developing a deeper understanding" [and] "developing a caring and shared understanding" and another participant noted that, "connection meant a bridging of relationships through open communication". The notion of connection seemed to represent the key around which all other aspects of relationships, including trust, empathy and time revolve. As one educator aptly stated, "that's really our focus here. We just focus on how we're best going to support and engage the families because it's through these relationships that we can ensure the child receives the best possible outcomes". Another participant described that, "when families are involved alongside educators and professionals and we are sensitive to the needs of the children and their families, relationships can become much stronger". From the perspective of working with children with disabilities one professional explained that "from talking to parents, being able to have some way of allowing families opportunities to come together with other parents of children with a disability was important". Relationships with other parents also supported these families and helped them to feel understood and socially included. This was deemed a key enabler as many family participants expressed feelings of isolation and a need for their child and family to be socially included

and participating more in daily life. Ideally relationships were said by ECEP participants to be based on notions of trust and empathy and the point of developing them was aimed at, "getting the connection happening".

For ECEP participants many saw the key enablers as being consistent and persistent with vulnerable children and families and one participant stated that, "consistency and keeping connected with the family were highly valuable traits given progress can be slow at times, particularly for those children and families experiencing highly complex circumstances". Another participant noted that, "caring for, showing empathy and supporting these children and families over the time is just a part of our role". One participant added, "there is no magic wand but just being there, with the same welcoming smile everyday as children and families walk into the ECEC setting are important approaches". A respondent explained that, "familiarity with these parents developed over time, through listening and genuinely caring for them, it is possible to develop trust". These qualities were considered essential in reaching out to, and engaging with, families facing adversity, and in trying to make a connection by providing flexible, outreach services. One professional respondent noted that this could be initiated by:

> providing practical help to meet their basic needs at home... trying to change the way of some of the observed negative experiences and just trying to inspire the parents to appreciate what they have achieved as parents and what their children have achieved.

Another professional respondent explained that sometimes in dealing with difficulties or barriers with families it is about, "how you look at the issues and from what perspective, whether through a deficit lens or a strength-based lens in relation to how you see a parent's capacity and behaviour". Another respondent added that it is essential that, "we understand that parents have their own issues and vulnerabilities without judgement and sometimes that's hard, especially when it comes to child protection concerns as protecting children and keeping them safe is central to our role". Yet another spoke from experience, "I have learnt to never underestimate a parent's capacity to change and develop out of their experience of adversity". A different position was taken by another ECEP who felt that parents might benefit from further education about their child. This stance reflects cultural differences about the nature of childhood. The ECEPs sought greater reflection and mindfulness from the family.

The ability to communicate clearly and set boundaries and expectations was described as important by most participants, to develop and maintain relationships and express the

everyday experiences of the children with families in a value-based way particularly with vulnerable and disadvantaged families. A participant noted, “there is not a one size fits all model that exists in working with families and every child and their parents are different and need different things from us”. Another participant pointed out that effective attributes of communication within relationships were related to, “being a good listener and displaying a respectful attitude and being open, caring and sensitive”. This allowed for families to be heard and their life contexts understood and without this, finding solutions to everyday problems could not occur. As one participant noted, “It is important to listen to and learn from the strategies that vulnerable families have used to minimise or change their circumstances”.

A respondent explained:

> some families can be immediately defensive, you’ve got to be very careful about what you're saying, especially early on before that trust is developed, and helping them understand why we’re asking questions about their child and family especially initially is [an] important [approach] to establish.

Another added:

> when you feel there are family stressors involved it is important to gain the family’s trust and be gentle in your approach with them, so you don’t scare them off, because often with vulnerable families they can drop out of programs easily and so I show respect and stand back a little and build up that bond and security with the children and the families day by day.

Communication was described as an active and reflective process. As one professional participant noted:

> It’s truly about listening to families and reflecting on what they are sharing with me and using positive communication that promotes trust and empathy in a way they can recognise and feel understood. It requires nurturing communication with parents so they feel safe to share their feelings, difficulties and needs whether for support for themselves or for their children.

Many participants expressed the importance of understanding family priorities and motivations regarding their child’s education. One respondent argued:

> If families do not feel like they are being understood and accepted it is less likely that they will share their experiences and their needs with us. None of this can occur without our feeling of empathy for families and creating trust between us. If we cannot demonstrate these qualities there is little hope that connections can be made or that positive changes can occur.

For the long-term benefit an educator participant noted that, "maintaining the lines of communication with families and having regular meetings with them works best, as strong lasting connections do not occur overnight". One educator described her communication strategy, "I want to know from families what's important to them away from the preschool setting; so we run a program called Notes from Home and I write a letter to the families at the beginning of the year to find out this information and keep building from that".

A participant added that:

> parents need varied and different ways for communication to occur. Some families might prefer a communication book ... some seem to like the staff to be verbally communicating regularly ... others may need you to text or email them or set up a time for a face-to-face meeting. I need to make sure that parents are kept up to date with their child's everyday progress and learning and to communicate any issues.

At the heart of successful relationships is effective communication between families and ECEPs. Consistently and particularly in responses from the vulnerable and disadvantaged families themselves and from ECEPs, relationship-building needed to be sincere and honest with family feelings, values, beliefs, backgrounds and perceptions respected. Most respondents acknowledged these were paramount in a families' responsiveness to services.

One educator stated:

> I've had in the past year a family who was identified as vulnerable and that for the mother this was a safe place for her. We say and show that the doors are always open to families and we encourage and welcome family contribution to the program, showing appreciation for their time and their efforts and this makes parents feel really good as well. This mum was in a domestic violence situation and she built up her confidence and self-esteem by coming in and reading to the children.

For these experiences to be acknowledged, ECEPs need to be aware that families may be living in a range of circumstances and be in a place to respond adequately and naturally to ensure families feel safe and secure in their dealings with ECEC services and the educators and professionals working within these environments.

Interestingly, not only outreach programs were mentioned, but also group programs were identified as enabling relationships for developing trust, empathy and rapport as one participant stated:

> sometimes being the key worker and going out to home visits, takes you a longer time to get to a certain point of rapport, understanding and trust with a family than it might have done if they'd been coming to a group weekly and regularly been able to talk more generally and been able to gain that trust more quickly.

There was limited mention by ECEPs about families wanting opportunities for networking with other families, apart from the ECEPs working with families with children with disabilities, which was highlighted as very important for them. One professional participant noted that, "other parents of children with a disability can be a great source of support to share information and swap stories and often the best source of support for one another".

Many participants noted, that barriers exist when they do not have time for the families and children in their service; without spending the time needed to establish familiarity and without empathetic attitudes that support families building trust is difficult. A respondent pointed out, "there's always the parents who feel comfortable with different staff members, and they'll tell different people different things, depending on the trust that's been developed and the time they have spent with staff to get to know staff members at the centre". Another participant noted, "you need to build the trust first. Parents have to feel comfortable with you and it's often a time thing – making sure that you are showing them that you've got time for them".

Collaborative Practices

What we know clearly from the research is that family satisfaction is predicated on the collaboration between professionals and services, the quality of these relationships and the meaningful involvement and control families have in their early childhood services. All participants stressed the importance of collaboration and explained that it is about working

together with another or others, whether it's the children and families, other team members within their service or professionals from other services to achieve intended outcomes for a child and their family. One participant noted, "collaborative practice is about working closely with my colleague at this pre-school, working as a team to support the children and their families and at times linking with broader agencies to achieve a common goal".

Collaborative partnerships and practices with families, carers and other professionals are identified as the most effective way to support vulnerable children and their families. Most participants underscored the importance of relationships involving all stakeholders by forming networks and building these partnerships between professionals within organisations and across the services involved. As one participant described one such scenario:

> often a parent may be linked in with a range of services, for example a mental health service because they may have depression—we have one mum, a single mum who has a young girl at this centre and she is very unwell and very lonely. We have built up trust with her, so she told us about the mental health nurse she sees and gave her permission and contact details, so we monitor to see how she is tracking and keep in touch with the nurse she sees at community health. We worked with the community health centre and were able to link her into a playgroup at community health and she now spends time with other peers in similar situations, young mums without partners who could understand where she was at and this group of women have been hugely important for her feeling and experiencing support and inclusion.

Another participant concurred that, "it is often important for families to connect with other services to support their needs and it's a key enabler, being able to share, connect with other professionals if they have broader health and wellbeing concerns".

Effective collaborative practices were seen by all participants to require trust, empathy and time and most participants recognised the importance of ensuring the control was held by the family. Partnerships required building relationships and having an open, accepting attitude as one educator mentioned, "I treat all families with respect and help to ensure they don't feel less important than other families". Such processes were seen to establish a sense of equality in the relationship, where the diversity of families and children were not seen as different but rather all accepted. Successful partnerships were seen as part of an exchange between two or more individuals, and this meant accepting others views even if different from their own and understanding that each family has its own set of customs, ideologies, commonalities, feelings

and emotions, culture and their own context that is unique to that family. Vulnerable and disadvantaged families, like all families have their own rules and expectations. Similarly, ECEPs have some shared experiences and training but do not necessarily function in the same way as a group that exists in a family context.

Participants raised the notion of exploration with families. It is of interest that once the possible influences of power balances or imbalances are addressed, the relationship is able to be free, to find its own context, and its own place, that is real, purposeful, responsive, egalitarian in understanding, and respectful as both groups come together for the purpose of the child and the family. When a power imbalance occurs it can become a barrier that may take a while to overcome. One participant suggested, "that some families have lived their whole lives feeling comparatively powerless, so the realisation that they have power can take a while". Once families recognise that they have some power in their relationships with ECEPs, then respect and partnerships can develop. When parents and ECEPs come together to solve problems, make decisions and support children in their early years there needs to be a renegotiating of traditional power models, reducing the notion of the expert/learner power model to become co-creators of understanding and practice. This process may not be smooth as families may have a number of stressors relating to pre-existing difficulties. As one educator stated, "I'd like to see more parent involvement". This inclusive attitude along with a willingness to understand and listen to parents meant that the power imbalance could potentially be reduced.

Concerns around the notion of reducing the power imbalance between educators and families were raised by many participants, particularly the importance of parents in decision-making about their children, and a desire to facilitate this, but as one participant shared, "it's a struggle to find the training or support needed to help translate those principles into real life practices on the ground". Another educator mentioned that, "strengths-based approaches support the strengths and capacities in families as opposed to focusing on their problems or concerns", and this was discussed in terms of empowering families and identifying and fostering the protective factors that promote their child's health, wellbeing, learning and development. One professional participant described, "building partnerships with parents in situations where there was known child abuse and neglect was very challenging and difficult but an important way to protect vulnerable children". Another participant explained that, "showing a genuine willingness to engage with families in the child protection system and

creating relationships based on power with rather than power over, and focusing on the strengths of families" was an important approach.

Strengths-based, family-centred approaches were discussed by most participants in the context of working with children and their families experiencing disability, vulnerability and disadvantage and saw this as empowering for families and helped ECEPs to understand the unique experience of the child and family. As one respondent noted, "I use a strength-based approach with the families here and work together with other agencies involved to help find solutions to any current issues that the child and family are experiencing".

Another participant explained:

> I do a lot of listening to the family to find out what the issues may be and accept that the families and others can help me in understanding what may be best for the child and family in their particular circumstances.

A respondent explained that:

> the strength-based approach I use with all the children is about believing the child has strengths, skills, competencies and resources they can access and in the same way I have this belief with their families who have these same attributes to access and draw from.

Another participant added, "We focus on a strengths based approach and look at what is working well in every aspect of our service, our practice, our service policies, our leadership and our relationships with the children, families and with each another".

Many participants described working flexibly alongside the families, while supporting and guiding them to learn how to best support their child's learning, development and wellbeing. As one participant stated, "our role is to identify, value and harness the strengths and experiences of families to ensure these are tapped into as the best resource and expertise in supporting their child". A professional participant explained, "I work in a family-centred way in early intervention and I can always see the family's strengths and my role is to help the families to build their confidence and abilities to promote their child's development, wellbeing and learning". Another educator participant pointed out, "You need to have the knowledge and empathy and all of the interpersonal skills to be able to work effectively with

the whole family". Another professional respondent added, "to be family-centred, you need to respect the families you work with and develop quality relationships that acknowledge and honor their different backgrounds, beliefs and strengths".

Collaboration was frequently mentioned as crucial to forming genuine partnerships with families. ECEPs repeatedly mentioned collaboration as underpinning and framing relationships, engagement and communication. An experienced educator stated:

> It is important to collaborate and make connections with other professionals and organisations involved in working with the child and their family to share responsibility with families in identifying strategies to support the child's learning and development and strengthen supports for children and families.

Moore (2010) describes the most effective collaborative teams as those which seek new family engagement models based on partnerships, relationships, collaboration, communication, professional development, relational and participatory practices, which involve action-taking, well-balanced approaches and capacity building. Participants raised many of these elements in their interviews. For the ECEPs, on a practical level collaboration meant sharing information and knowledge around children and their families' needs, coming together with them to seek out the best solutions, with a combination of effort and understanding, using joint expertise and knowledge.

Participants suggested strategies that they have used to build collaborative relationships. The first step was to build trust. As one educator noted, "I always educate the parent as well .... You can talk to me, always it will be confidential, and it's very hard when children are there to talk, but they always can call me". Once established, parents and ECEPs can work together with a common goal of facilitating equal participation of the child and family, while developing shared understanding. Most participants spoke about engagement as more than just involvement, but incorporating, "active participation, enabling families to be there as equal partners, having a shared responsibility".

Effective collaboration results in inclusivity in professional and educational practice. Inclusive education recognises that every child regardless of their needs and circumstances has the same right to participate fully and have the same choices, opportunities and experiences as other children. Having a, "connection with the teacher and also if the family's able to chat and not feel so embarrassed … to get through the front door, is a big thing".

Successful connections require parents and families to feel safe and welcomed, so they can share their experiences and needs. For inclusive education to occur it is necessary to have a sense of belonging, family cohesion, a network of parents, as well as people who emphasise these values. ECEPs noted that, parents and families needed a sense of support not only for themselves but also from within their peer-group of families, particularly for those families with children with disabilities. Relationship building between ECEPs and vulnerable and disadvantaged families is crucial to support the child who is at the focal point of all aspects in the ECEC sector from planning, policy to implementation.

Without consistency and familiarity trust cannot exist and without trust meaningful relationships cannot evolve. Inclusion also means families are a part of the early years' process but this is not always instantaneous. As one ECEP observed:

> vulnerable families are sensitive, very sensitive. If families become defensive, or think that you're judging them or don't care about them, they are likely to leave the service, so you've got to be very careful with that. Getting some families to engage in other services apart from early intervention is difficult, to encourage them to get out of the house and go to playgroup, kinder or childcare.

Ideally ECEPs, other service professionals, and families should partner together for the greatest benefit to the child and family, sharing in the decision-making, working to understand each other's perspectives and communicating openly. Without these stakeholders coming together in this partnership the benefits will not eventuate. Collaboration is a two-way process. It involves commitment from the ECEPs in the service and the external agencies to work together for child and family outcomes and persist even in the face of difficulties and obstacles. The ultimate success of the work will depend on the honesty and transparency with the family and the willingness of all involved to collaboratively work together. In collaborative relationships a demonstration of trust, respect, acceptance and empathy for the child and family must be displayed at all times, regardless of progress of the work.

Professional Learning

ECEPs were keen for further PD in collaborative relationships and practices to increase their skills specifically for their ECEP role, working with children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The desire and need for professional development was represented widely throughout the data. A number of participants spoke

about feeling that their training had not adequately prepared them for all facets of their ECEP work.

The ECEPs in this study all reported having received training in early childhood development, but in this training there was little focus on working with families and utilising approaches such as strength-based family-centred practices. The ECEPs expressed a strong desire for this knowledge in particular. They also explained that contemporary societal challenges were often very different from when they did their training. One participant recalled, "when I studied early childhood education at university, I did not learn anything about working with vulnerable children and their families. I feel very unprepared for this work". It seemed that many ECEPs needed further training opportunities that were relevant to their day-to-day practice. This included professional development around working with those with disabilities and special needs (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder), trauma informed practice, working with people experiencing homelessness, working with refugees, migrants, and Indigenous populations, and those socio-economic concerns. More broadly the participants desired counselling and family partnership training and learning more around building empathy and compassion in working with vulnerable families, understanding and having the ability to respond to a diversity of cultures, in an inclusive and non-judgmental manner.

Other ECEP participants' again recounted positive experiences with PD but as one said, "it wasn't enough" and another commented on types of training received, "if you had a developmental checklist they wouldn't all come out the same way. So I think that ... PD that goes with that across the field is really good". Another educator concurred:

> I want to keep learning and engaging effectively with vulnerable families. More training and Professional Development never goes astray, you can never have too much I don't think, there's always new insights and new research being learnt and developed that always helps us. I'd love to have a greater understanding of how the whole system works with early intervention and community health services, how each of those different agencies that we often refer to work.

Several participants also mentioned that many training sessions or programs like Bridges out of Poverty, Connections, Child First, BBB projects were all gone and the forums faded away and this caused feelings of frustration.

ECEPs indicated the need for new ideas based on evidence and experience, particularly around an adult family training model, more emphasis on a key-person model approach, teaching children further protective and foundational factors to make them more resilient in future life, and ensuring the ECEC setting is a safe and protected space for children. Even if PD was available, ECEP participants also recognised the importance of having time to assimilate new approaches and discuss the application and implementation with colleagues.

As one participant explained:

> the last training I had, I did really benefit from that ... but it takes more than time to learn ... There are strategies to learn that would be appropriate and would work best for families … I didn't have that much knowledge when I first started here and there are lots of us who want to know more and do more for these children and families ... so you know that was really good to do some training.

Participants wanted training sessions but they also wanted time to, "take things in ... network with others to build relationships with peers, colleagues and mentors".

One participant summed up what was needed:

> a discussion at regular network meetings, the opportunity for professional dialogue about working with vulnerable families, oversight, mentoring from an expert would be ideal ... it needs to be for the whole team ... we will benefit from hearing this specific information and having that opportunity to listen to others, to discuss those things.

Ongoing training was desired and many observed they needed and required more of this to develop their understanding and capability but, as well time to work amongst themselves was also seen as very important.

ECEPs felt that after attending PDs they needed help to translate principles and practices they have learnt into real life practice on the ground. Many sought out opportunities to have staff role models who could provide mentoring and leadership. It was noted positively by one educator that, "we do communicate, there's a lot of communication with other co-workers, colleagues but we would benefit from more of it and building it into our practice".

There was some ambivalence about PD and one ECEP explained that, "there is a sense that we should just know what to do but many of us don't know how to deal with the diverse and complex needs of families and need more training". One participant felt that she should not feel intimidated or embarrassed about asking questions and wanting more expertise. This devolved to a discussion of the importance of communication and accessibility to leaders, mentors and colleagues. Without this collegiality and support questions were not answered and there was a sense of inadequacy, stress and uncertainty in working in the everyday with children and families particularly those who are in need or who have complex difficulties that might require additional skills or knowledge. One ECEP explained that she felt that some other team members lacked empathy towards children and their families and:

> if we could broaden their base of knowledge and increase their level of compassion, then we would open a lot more doors, and unfortunately that's not in my role description, but I do feel that's an area where we could certainly support and help educators to grow as professionals.

She felt strongly about this and argued that, "it would be great to be able to do more work with them to build their empathy of vulnerable families, to build their understanding of what vulnerability is, how that impacts on the family and the child". This ECEP went into more detail about what she felt should be included in the programs suggesting social inclusion and diversity, We need flexibility and responsiveness in the programs we deliver, including transitions, and routines. All ECEPs felt that PD should be deliberate, focused, accountable and relevant. PD should give ECEPs an opportunity to know how to negotiate everyday outcomes with a variety of differences and similarities. Accountability requires deliberate and intentional value-based teaching that acknowledges its purpose and recognises the individual within relationships. It was seen as important to know where to get external support and help if they needed it and the participant expressed the, "value of in-services, there's not too much of it around…" [and] she also added, "sometimes during training sessions [we] were crammed into one day workshops and there was a lot to take in". Having pathways to assistance for these ECEPs was seen as vitally important. It was also suggested that it would be great to have opportunities to attend an effective communication course, learning how to listen to criticism and negative responses, how to be an effective listener, actively listening to those vital conversations. Sometimes it's not necessarily only what they say but what they don't say. This is interwoven around the way people could improve their ability to partake in discussions, becoming a genuine listener rather than a talker, being open to change and

improvement, being proactive and engaged in discussions. This requires a willingness to share in a parallel process that negotiates outcomes with openness, with equality and with respect.

Overall the ECEPs wanted to, "learn more about communication and find better ways to engage" with the children and their families and with each other. Communication and collaboration were seen as important in building mutual respect and required specific skills, which may or may not exist naturally. ECEPs suggested a range of strategies for improving their daily engagement with others. Education and PD undertaken in the past was seen as inadequate and all participants desired more up to date and relevant courses and the time to reflect and adapt new knowledge to their professional situations. Clearly ECEPs are committed to upskilling their professional practice to meet the challenges of working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families.

Concluding Remarks

The data from early childhood educators and professionals has indicated a desire for further knowledge and professional development focused on working effectively with children and their families experiencing vulnerabilities and disadvantage and opportunities for mentoring within the workplace.

Many early childhood educators and professionals expressed that they feel well prepared for child-focused work, however not as well prepared for adult-focused work around engagement and collaborative partnerships and effective ways of communicating and supporting families.

Effective partnerships were seen to be non-judgemental, non-threatening, non-expert approaches and demonstrating reliability, commitment, trustworthiness, confidentiality and empathy. It was seen as important to spend time building rapport with families and critical that parents are involved in decision making.

Concepts emerged around relationships and there were a number of key themes that came up repeatedly from the interviews with educators and professionals in relation to collaboration and engagement, communication and support and genuine partnerships with families.

CHAPTER 6: FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY, DISADVANTAGE AND/OR DISABILITY

Introduction

In this study the families were made up of children and their parents, guardians, and carers, which included mothers, fathers, aunties and uncles, grandparents and/or other extended family members. All the participants were experiencing the challenges of vulnerability, disadvantage and/or disability and identified varied family factors, stressors and challenges in their lives. Exploring the enablers and barriers for children and their families the researcher pinpointed these factors: successful access, engagement, participation in an ECEC, leadership by a non-judgemental, compassionate and skilled ECEP who offers children and their families a nurturing space, where they can be themselves, and know that they will be treated equally and with respect.

The Victorian Government has developed a shared policy definition of vulnerability, which provides context for my research, and states that:

> Over-represented among vulnerable families are those from particular population groups such as Aboriginal families, newly arrived immigrants, those children and families affected by disability, low-income families and young parents.
>
> These family factors are strongly represented with the participating children and families in this research. Many factors can be involved in making a child and/or family vulnerable: family stressors, economic hardship, unemployment, business failure, gambling or homelessness, family violence, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health problems, disability and parental history of abuse and neglect. (Victorian Vulnerable Children Strategy, 2013)

My research resonates with this documentation and these problems are frequently multiple and complex. These factors are evident in the Knox Municipality where this research is situated.

Involvement in high quality early childhood and parenting support programs can lessen some of the negative impacts of children and their families experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage and/or disability. Children are influenced by the environments in which they develop and by the services their families access and receive. Vulnerable families need to be

supported in education and care programs and these early childhood services need to provide quality care and learning environments where children spend their time. Children's contexts are influenced primarily by the family context (Moore 2013; Siraj-Blatchford, as cited in Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009). Families can benefit from the support of ECEPs when trust and empathy is established and time is spent with families to understand their current circumstances. Research evidence has shown that primarily the greatest effect on a child's educational and developmental progress is through family and their ability to provide an enriched learning environment at home and have strong foundational and protective factors. Family functioning can adversely affect or support achievement and can cause a gap in a wide range of skills and developmental progress for children who are born to and live in contexts that contain risk factors:

> Family functioning relates to the strength and quality of family relationships and the family's ability to nurture, care and provide for one another (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C, 2009). The quality of family functioning is fundamentally important to societal health and resilience. Conditions that determine the quality of family functioning include: adequate housing; access to social services and support; parenting skills; secure parental employment; financial security; time spent with, and communication between, family members; connection with the community; and family conflict and violence ... will have health, behavioural and social repercussions for young family members, and poorer outcomes for them later in life (Olesen, Macdonald, Raphael & Butterworth, 2010). (Australian Government, AIHW, 2005, para 1.)

Demographics

To summarise, thirty families who were accessing varied Knox Council early years services such as preschools, childcare centres (occasional and long day care), family day care, early childhood intervention, inclusion support services and maternal and child health centres in the Knox Council Municipality were given an online survey and participated in semi-structured interviews. The survey provided contextualising data and the interviews provided deep rich data in relation to understandings of their lived experiences. In general terms the definition of vulnerability and disadvantage applies to those who nominate or are otherwise identified in ways set out by the Victorian State Government—in many cases, this means that a family and/or child will hold a Healthcare Card, Pensioner/Concession Card, a designated

Visa, and/or a written referral and recommendation from a health or welfare professional. All of the participant families identified varied family factors, stressors and challenges in their lives and most participants expressed an experience in their lives of feeling stressed, isolated and poorly resourced.

Of the families surveyed and interviewed the majority of parents reported that they were from Bayswater, Boronia, The Basin, Wantirna, Wantirna South and Ferntree Gully. The majority of the children of the participating families surveyed accessing services were aged between three to five years of age and four years of age and accounted for one quarter of those sampled. Across the participant group the children and families attended Knox Council ECEC Services and between all participants had accessed every type of service in education and care. Most children had been attending a service/s for one or two years and the remainder had attended for either three to four years or less than one year.

This study asked the family participants to identify and discuss the enablers and what was working well for them and for their child in the ECEC program they were attending. Participants were also asked what was not working well in the programs they were attending and what did they perceive to be the barriers. It was essential that the voice of the recipients of early childhood services and programs be heard (Tellis, 1997). By seeking this, it aimed to reveal the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and disadvantaged families so that the former could be fostered and the latter resolved. By this process it was hoped that children and their families and the ECEPs who worked with them felt empowered within the ECEC setting and in the home environment. This chapter explores how families including their children sought out social connection, which included developing a sense of belonging and inclusion, combating feelings of isolation, and fostering trust in relationships. While the children's perspective chapter focuses on the children in the context of these families

Findings

Before discussing the overall findings from the participant families I will present the understandings of two family participants who reflected the range of enablers and barriers raised. The experiences of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds including migrant families specifically those who leaves their country and makes a considered decision to pursue a better or different life somewhere else. Refugee families specifically those who are not able or willing to stay in their home country due to natural or man-made

disasters, threats or fear of being persecuted for their race, religion, nationality, political views/opinions, or membership in a social/ethnic group and asylum seeker families seeking refugee status, but whose claim has not been assessed or approved. These circumstances result in difficult stressors for the families, and from an ECEP's perspective, working with these families could be complex.

Participant migrants and refugees came from many different parts of the world, holding differing cultural and religious beliefs and many spoke different languages. I selected the two families as case studies because their stories encapsulate many of the issues raised by all participating families and because there is a remarkable connection between the two. These two refugee participant families met briefly in an off-shore detention centre and about eighteen months later were serendipitously reunited at a pre-school in Knox. The two families are referred to as Parent participant 1 (PP1) and Child participant 1 (CP1), and Parent participant 2 (PP2) and Child participant 2 (CP2).

The two separate families in this story came from different parts of the world (Lebanon and Sudan) and both lived on Christmas Island (Immigration Reception and Processing Centre) in the Indian Ocean near Australia at the same time. They briefly met in detention but only became friends when their children ended up at the same pre-school at Knox.

PP1 is a strong, resilient woman, a single mother of four children who arrived in one of the Knox suburbs and started at a local preschool in 2015. She lives in rental accommodation, sharing one room with all of her four children. She has no car and limited access to public transport, so she has been walking everywhere (long distances) with the children. She explained:

> I always want my children to be happy and to be good children, to help me, to look after each other and be kind and behave and learn well. It's very busy with four children, with all the walking to appointments, cooking, shopping, cleaning, washing, getting things done for the kids for kinder and school. I need to get to appointments for the kids and myself and I am studying too. It's been very busy and hard on my own and I miss my husband. I miss my family and my friends in my country.

PP1, CP1 (4 years old) and the other three children (aged 6, 3 and 1) have been in Melbourne for about 12 months. They came from Lebanon to Christmas Island, where they

lived for 18 months. PP1 was pregnant with the youngest child (a young boy) when the family travelled on a boat to Christmas Island. PP1 recounted:

> We were on the boat for 4 nights and 5 days and we were very frightened and I thought my children and I would all die. I was very worried about my children and the effects on them with the situation in our home country and the experiences on the boat and staying on Christmas Island. I am so sad to be separated from my husband and for our children not to be able to see him or be with him. It has been very lonely and isolating being on my own.

Her baby was born on Christmas Islands. The father is still in Lebanon and is unable to come to Australia. He has not seen his wife or the children since they left. He is in a 'holding pattern' in the system in Lebanon and unlikely to see his wife and children for some years. PP1 explains that the father is currently experiencing severe mental health issues and suicidal ideation and is desperate to see and be with his family. The father has been told that it would be 10-12 years before they will see each other. PP1 and her children arrived in Melbourne on temporary protection visas and were located in Sunshine. Whilst living in Sunshine a refugee agency she was linked with, contacted a Knox Preschool and an educator from this Preschool made the initial contact with the family. PP1 described her relationship with the preschool staff:

> They are lovelies and very special. I trust them and they are caring and understanding. They help me very much. They talked to the refugee agency to find out how they could help me and help my children. They care about my daughter and all my children. My daughter is included in the group and joining in with all the children. They are interested in Lebanon and ask me about my country and say [CP1] can bring some things in to show the children from our country. We have some little things to show them and some photos. They are teaching my daughter lots of things and she is very happy at this kinder and learning many things and she is happy being here with her friend CP2. They have helped me to have an appointment with the community health centre and they talk with the XX to help me with my mental worries and my emotions.

The pre-school staff gave T shirts, windcheaters and bags and other clothes and kinder supplies to the children, as they did not have much in the way of resources or money. The preschool community provided some other necessary items such as a pram because they had

to walk a long way to get to the pre-school and other services and supports. PP1 initially felt that she had to, "earn her way" to get the support, education and care for her child. This was not the expectation of the staff but this is what PP1 felt.

PP1 is unable to drive in Australia at present. She did have an international licence, when she first arrived but when her daughter started primary school here (close to the preschool), she was fined for stopping her car in the middle of the road, in front of the school, on a rainy day and leaving it there while she collected her daughter, "as is practice in my country". She had failed to park in a designated car park. She shared that she was very embarrassed that her licence has been suspended and she did not know all the Australian road rules. She is not employed yet which means she is not a wage earner and this affects her financially and emotionally, because her sense of self-worth has been affected by not working. PP1 is reliant on limited payment from the government. PP1 explained that she is a trained nurse in Lebanon and wants to work in childcare here. She speaks Arabic, with limited English and is currently studying English in weekly classes. PP1 shared that she feels very isolated and out of place here and not aware of everything she should be, about the rules and social conventions. PP1 is learning and grateful for people's understanding and kindness at kinder. She explained that when she first arrived it was very important for her to stay at the kinder each day. She did this for 9-10 weeks so that she could be close to her daughter in a new place and she liked to help the staff by sweeping, cleaning and cooking. By doing so she felt that she was contributing.

In Lebanon, on the boat and in detention, the PP1 and her family experienced severe hunger. CP1 now manifests behaviour associated with this deprivation. She is often seen to take her lunch box to a private space, open it and devour the food very fast. PP1 brings large amounts of food to the kinder to share, which is a different response to the experience of deprivation. PP1 spoke about having limited options for housing but that it has worked out well and she likes the area where she lives with her children. She met an elderly couple who helped her and are actually her neighbours and landlord, because she lives at the back of their house. They are helping her out with some babysitting, when she needs to go out to take CP1 to kinder and do the grocery shopping, go to the doctors.

PP2 and her five children (all girls) are refugees from Sudan. Her daughter (CP2) is four years old and started kinder at a Knox Preschool in 2015. PP2 and her children have

moved into the Knox area. She also has personal resources and resilience in her day-to-day life and is a very strong woman. The participant noted:

> I feel very lucky and fortunate being here in Melbourne, being here with my children and being able to give my children a better life. I am a good mother and I want to see my children happy and healthy and I want the very best for all of my children. All I want for my daughter is for her to be included with the other children and to make friends and be happy and feel like she belongs here. My daughter CP2 is very happy at kinder and she loves to come here. She was excited to come here from the first day and she counts her sleeps so she knows when she is coming to the kinder again. I am proud of CP2 and what she is learning and doing and how she is progressing. She is learning different new things all of the time. She knows lots of new words and sings lots of new songs and the teachers read many stories to the children and she loves the stories. The kinder has stories about Sudan and other pictures and puzzles and games. CP2 knows about healthy things and learning these things at kinder. I drink lots of coffee and CP2 says mum, coffee is bad for you mum, you need to drink lots of big glasses of water, not coffee. CP2 learnt this at kinder from the visiting dental program and she came home and told me. She is always learning at the kinder and I am happy to see her grow.

The pre-school educator went to introduce and connect this new family (PP2, CP2 and siblings) with CP1 and PP1 they recognised each other from Christmas Island, despite being in different sections, and not being able to spend time together. They had not seen each other since their time in detention. The mothers were so happy to see each other and so were the girls (CP1 and CP2). The mothers both speak Arabic and hit it off straight away, having had shared experiences at Christmas Island, both on their own with their young children and coming to Australia and ending up at the same preschool. It was a very special and unique experience for them. They now have a close friendship and connection together. The participant mother, PP2 explained:

> I am so happy to meet PP1. We see each other at Christmas Island but did not speak together on the Island, but when the teacher introduced us, I knew who she was and I recognised the children. We were both so excited to see one another and the children too. My English language is not very good so I am very happy I can talk with PP1 in Arabic. I am studying in Aged Care to get a job here to support my family. I worked

> as a beautician in Sudan. My friend PP1 and I spend lots of time together now and helping each other with our children. I have a car and so I can drive PP1 and the children to the doctors, chemist and supermarket and all those kinds of places. We are close like family with all our children. I am a single mum, and being at home with young children and having one child with a disability/developmental issues is very hard and it's good to have adult company. I was feeling so lonely coming here and now I have a friend. I worry about my child XX because she is not developing like my other children (I am worried about her behaviour with her sisters). She is coming here to kinder next year. The kinder are helping me get more support for my child and I get to have some time out for myself too, which I need as it's busy doing it all on my own. I do the same for my friend. I help her so she can have some time out as well. PP1 has been sick lately, so I am helping her. My friend understands my situation because she is in the same situation and we respect each other and we are both doing our very best for our children and we understand the difficulties because we both experience them.

They are looking after each other and caring for all their children. PP2 is not with her husband due to child protection issues, and her husband is located in Melbourne but does not have access to the children or see PP2. She continued:

> It was very difficult to separate from my husband. I didn't want to separate from him but I had to do this because he was always very angry and there was family violence, so I needed to move away from this relationship and keep us safe. I am very sad and worried about the relationship break down and the conflict the children saw, the child protection issues and the negative effects of the break up, the violence and the abuse. I worry for my children and I am stressed about money and getting the things the children need. I am worried for my child who is at school and she is lonely and not making any friends. She is unhappy and I would like some help for her. The kinder are trying to find help for her.

The two mothers share the pickup and drop offs to and from kinder and school. CP1 and CP2 are best friends. PP2 described her relationship with the preschool staff:

> The kinder teachers spent time getting to know me and my daughter and my other children too when we came here and wanted to know about where we came from and what was important for my family. They were caring and kind. They are supporting me and my daughter and all of my other children. They are honest, listen to me and

> respect me. They are understanding and helpful and care about me too. They give practical help and support for me and for my children. I bring in letters and they help me read them so I know what I need to do and what the letters and paperwork is about. They helped me with my other daughter who has some problems, some disability. I am grateful as they are able to help me with the things that are difficult for me right now and I trust them. The teachers are lovely, friendly, caring and understand me and my cultural background and my problem with language.

Drawings by CP1 and CP2 are included in the children's perspective chapter. As they drew their images, they discussed their families. CP1 drew an image of playing with the playdough and explained that, "if I don't have muscles and be strong I will go back to the Island. I have to be strong with muscles so I don't go back there to the Island, mum says". In her drawing she included her mother sitting with her and her friend CP2. The playdough table was the first activity CP1 did on her first day at kinder. CP1 added that, 'I love CP2. She is helping me make a cake out of playdough. I am a big girl because I eat lots of food'. CP2 also drew a picture that was all about the belonging tree at kinder. This is where the photos of the children are placed as they enter kinder. CP2 drew herself and her friend CP1 of their photos on the belonging tree. The two children wanted to have their drawings combined into one book.

When I was observing relationships and listening to family participant interviews sometimes it was those unquantifiable experiences that really seemed to matter most. These families' journeys showed how important the feelings of social connection, having a sense of belonging and inclusion and how sharing experiences and spending time with people who have similar circumstances such as culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds, were essential.

Many families described the importance of being able to come together and share their experiences, which seemed to help families feel connected and understood. Their lives were fraught with many problems and difficulties that they encountered on a daily basis. For some, even getting their children to their ECEC service each day could be challenging. Families that had experienced feelings of isolation driven by past experiences such as trauma, poverty, and estrangement initially did not have an immediate sense of trust and rapport when entering ECEC services. Gradually they have been able to build relationships that are now marked with trust and empathy. Importantly they expressed that they are in a safe and supportive

ECEC environment. This was seen to build familiarity and connection, through shared experiences and growing feelings of inclusion and belonging. With time families felt they could stay and participate in these services. This is demonstrated in the stories of PP1 and PP2 and their families who have been brought together with a shared experience in a place and space where connection and belonging can occur. Other refugee parent participants described experiences of accessing and trusting ECEC services. One participant explained that it was her worker at community health who, "told me about my local preschool and how I could enrol in this service and she helped me fill in the paperwork as well". Another described her engagement, "They listen to me, not judging, blaming or looking down on me, staff worked with refugee agency and there were consistent staff members I could talk to that gave me trust in the service and the people".

All Participants: The Needs of Families

The vulnerable and disadvantaged families' participants expressed many views from their own lived experience. They identified both enablers and barriers to successful participation, engagement and relationships with the ECEPs and other families, attending the ECEC programs. Analysis of the data revealed issues for families and encompassed their relationships with others in the milieu of their lived experience. The identified themes included positive communication approaches, instilling trust, respecting the voices of families, empowerment and a values-based humanitarian approach to working with them. Perceptions and feelings surrounding relationships came up continually as factors for families that both assisted and restricted the early years' experience for them. Families felt that a key worker or key contact person that could facilitate their engagement with services, was vital and the presence of a consistent person was essential for them. Family participants indicated that the relationship with their ECEPs in relation to the care, nurture and development of their child was of utmost importance. When this relationship was based around trust and consistency they felt comfortable and safe. Supportive in this relationship was the accessibility of the key worker or constant contact that understood and showed empathy for their child and the rest of the family. Reflecting on prior experiences, when this relationship was not a good one, families encountered a lack of trust, respect, inconsistent contact, difficulties in accessing staff and a lack of care. This made child and family interaction with services more difficult and less productive. Another participant explained about the importance of consistency and trust:

> We are happy here at this kinder. They have been happy to learn about my son and the Aboriginal way, our culture, our family. My son is happy here. I like and trust the teacher here and I only like to speak to her. I can talk to her at any time. The only thing that is hard here is to understand all the paperwork but the teacher helps with this. This is the longest time we have been in a service and the staff plan for my son to learn and he is happy and has two friends at kinder. The teacher respects me, respects my culture. She asks me about what is important for me and for my son, for my people, my mob.

Having one key worker or key contact person was an enabler for most family participants with comments around this saturating the data. One family participant with a child with significant challenges noted that:

> to be honest my key worker has been very diligent. There was a period where I was almost seeing the key worker every week but … actually there were weeks between when I saw the therapist. The early intervention service presented all the services and supports from the one place and through the one person. Everyone related to the support for my child talked together about what was happening, so that has been good, ideal for us.

Another family participant explained that:

> We worked mostly with one person who made themselves available regularly for our family. She wanted the best for our child and our whole family and she helped us know about ways to access the other services we needed. She gave us other information about available funding, which helped us access and participate in other needed programs. Our key worker knew someone I could talk to about financial counselling and helped me make the first appointment with them.

One of the mothers explained that:

> the centre understands my needs and my child's needs. It doesn't necessarily have to be a specific problem with my child or anything like that, it can be just an issue that's happening, like we are struggling due to separating from my boyfriend. The staff know about it and support me as well as my child. It is difficult for me and for my daughter and I have a lot of issues. I have money issues, health issues and other

> lifestyle issues and the staff are aware of my history and my needs, so they are not just caring for my daughter but also they are caring about me.

The participants agreed that having one main contact was critical. Relationships with a particular "key worker" were much better than "having different people all the time". The reasoning behind this was around establishing familiarity and consistency for the child and the families. This continuity meant that the family and children felt comfortable, safe and in a relationship with their key worker that is built on trust and respect. Support and feeling confident were essential for successful outcomes. They also identified that their key contact person communicated with other professionals in supporting their child and their family to respond to all the issues the family presented, not just those specific to the child. As one father mentioned about his child:

> he finds it hard to learn and make friends and he has lots of behaviours that are challenging for us and for others in our day-to-day life. My parents are supportive but they find it difficult to deal with his challenging behaviours. We felt very isolated before we started early intervention and we are slowly starting to meet other parents in similar situations, which really helps us. It is very isolating having a child with a disability and our carer really understands this and the staff at early intervention are warm and caring professionals. We trust them and know they want the best for our son and our family. They are very supportive of our cultural background and our beliefs.

Another participant confirmed that not only was the early intervention for their child helpful but also, "it's been great for us to get to know other families who have a child with a disability".

Hearing the Voice of Families

Families spoke about current and prior relationships between parents and ECEPs and mentioned that these were easily damaged if ECEPs are insensitive about their anxieties and dismissive of their concerns. Families had experience of ECEPs who adopted an expert role and attempted to tell parents what to do. One participant stressed that, "It's the values and building self-esteem that are important". An ECEPs attitude was seen as a strong enabler or barrier depending on how concerns, ideas or support were expressed. Throughout this data collection, relationships and relationship-building have been highlighted. In this, time is essential. Vulnerable and disadvantaged families and their children need attention and this

requires more time, and having an opportunity to bring up things they were concerned about. Families desired greater understanding as they often felt that accepting help and feeling compared against the norm was difficult enough. Families needed to feel accepted and respected for their understanding and knowledge regarding their own children's educational and developmental needs. One family participant was well aware that her son had a learning disability and needed more help. To provide this, ECEPs need to work with families so that they can understand one another's perspectives. Parents need to feel good about themselves and believe they have a voice in their child's learning and that their child has a place in the world.

Families wanted to give their child the skills and guidance to become successful adults. One father who had three children with disabilities felt they were not fitting into their ECEC program. He was concerned about this and wanted his children to understand the rules of the world and be liked by other children and educators. This father was concerned for his children's current and future acceptance, inclusion and sense of belonging. Often developing social skills and getting along with peers was seen as a concern of parents for their children. The parents were well aware that the perception of normal might differ between families due to stressors at home but they felt supported when they were being listened to and their children were being heard. One strategy to assist in this process was to be linked to other families who were experiencing similar concerns. Without peer relationships, feelings of isolation and a lack of support often meant that the early years' experience was difficult. Participant families identified many barriers to accessing ECEC services that made them feel vulnerable. For some giving their children the same opportunities as other children was hugely stressful, complex and just too hard. At the end of the day one family participant said, "I think it's the person that makes the difference, and your good heart that counts, sometimes the knowledge of feeling you can't live up to the challenges of parenting can be very overwhelming, but it's just being there for your child, it's just seeing your child grow up and choosing a service that will be supportive". In some ways participants spoke about the services as extensions of their families, where they connected with people who cared about them and their children. A participant explained this clearly:

> I am 19 years old and on my own with my baby girl and I don't have anything to do with my parents. I don't work and didn't finish high school. I struggle to pay my bills on time and I worry about how I will be able to pay for things I need. I am lucky with my family day care educator and her family are kind to me and don't make me feel

> bad because I am a single mum. They are happy that my daughter is growing and developing well and they are just as excited as me when she does something new in her development. My family day care educator is very supportive and caring and she has helped me with being a mum and taught me about the things I need to do to look after her. She's like a mum to me.

A Relationship-Based Approach

From a participant perspective effective relationships underpinned all engagement and decision-making about the child and their family. Participants wanted to feel heard, accepted and involved by ECEPs as partners in decision-making. It was noted by one participant that with, "different educators in the service the relationships could be very different". Some relationships were very caring and very responsive to each other. Some relationships were less so. A participant felt that the lack of disclosure from ECEPs could be a barrier. She was hesitant but noted that, "professionals used to sort of, I don't want to say this wrong, but they sort of used to not tell me things". Without the sharing of information, families felt left out out of the knowledge of their child's progress, leading to them feeling excluded from participating in their child's early years care. Some ECEPs were seen as very factual and distant and this was seen as a barrier compared to others that were warm, affectionate and caring for the children. ECEPs who knew the family were seen to be part of an enabling relationship, which comprised so many caring gestures to make it work. Other factors identified included the size and type of service. Having all different types of services presented in the one place was seen as really helpful; the one stop shop model was very convenient. A smaller service was described by a participant as:

> feeling like a little community. You often know others when you are dropping off and picking up. It's often the same time so you see the same families and you know which children belong to which families whereas I can't imagine that, in bigger services you would have the same connection.

A smaller community encourages children to make connections and form their own friendship groups. These groups could extend to the families. Several participants explained that occasional care suited their needs better than long day care because they could not afford to pay for a full day and did not need all of these hours for care, but needed the flexibility offered by occasional care.

Early intervention included short-term groups for families and made it possible for parents to participate in these groups and meet others. One mother said, "if I wasn't part of an early intervention [program] I would have found it harder to find that group". Wanting to be involved in groups with other parents is a common theme throughout the family participant interviews.

One mother mentioned that before receiving services:

> I felt alone and isolated and that attending these services and groups was very important for me and for many families I have met. It's because then you can start opening up and relate to each other in some deeper ways. We tend to relate in the same way. Emotionally what we go through is pretty much the same despite our child's disability.

Several participants spoke specifically about the process of having their child's disability diagnosed. Receiving the diagnosis was both relieving and stressful. Finding others who had had the same experience was significant. One participant explained that, "it makes you feel like you're not alone. At the start you feel so alone as soon as you get diagnosed". Being part of a group helped parents cope with the complexities of understanding their child's needs, the interventions and various therapies and approaches. One parent who had a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder initially felt overwhelmed by the plethora of people and activities but found that by attending a group she was more able to cope. She was appreciative that other families and ECEPs were, "willing to be in that circle with her and her family". Participation for a family or child meant that they were engaged in activities, and were able to feel the same as everyone else. Initially receiving a diagnosis could engender grieving but with time it was possible to achieve a sense of belonging and inclusion. Early intervention was seen as a major enabler.

Social Connection

Having a strong sense of social connection meant that vulnerable and disadvantaged families felt a wider sense of belonging in the community. Many parents discussed wanting to feel a connection, wanting to feel a sense of belonging and being included and having their child included and welcomed into a program. The desire, "I would love to be able to talk to people in a similar situation", was expressed many times from families who wanted connection with other families experiencing similar situations as themselves. A feeling of trust and safety to explore relationships in a protected space seemed necessary as did needing

to feel and be part of relationships that were non-judgmental and open. One grandmother participant explained:

> I had issues with speaking to others and actually trying to make friendships. They pretty much threw me into every single course they had just so I could be involved and be able to communicate with other families and find that I'm not the only person on the duck pond paddling madly underneath to get through.

Another participant similarly expressed:

> I don't mind talking on the phone but when it comes to talking to someone in person I find it hard to explain anything so when someone asks me a question about the boys specifically I go blank especially with my oldest [child] because he has such a huge array of issues with his behaviour that I don't even know where to start. It really helped when the ECEPs were there to help me through and draw out of me what was important and when other families were friendly so I could feel a bit more relaxed with them.

Families found that relationships with other families tended to work out well when there was mutual understanding of their respective children's needs. Coming together as families in similar situations often meant breaking down feelings of isolation and allowing for greater engagement. As one family participant responded, "I think we need more reason and opportunity to connect with other parents". The benefits described seemed to be profound and were definitely considered an enabler to family engagement. One participant encapsulated her experience with relationship building:

> the biggest thing is they have to realise that all children are different, they have different needs. I've been very fortunate but you have to get workers that are willing to get down to the children's level, not get frustrated with them, because I've seen that too. And they need to make my child feel comfortable within the environment and with whatever might be going on because that helps me, it makes me feel more comfortable knowing that this person is out to help and support me and my child.

Most participants described the, "need for time to learn to trust" in their relationships with ECEPs. This was the same for their children being part of a service, and "needing time, consistency and feeling safe". This was deemed critically important and could affect whether a child's ECEC service access and participation could succeed. Many participants pointed out

that it was, "difficult to attend a service knowing my child has issues". Many families felt that without feeling safe their children could not grow or develop well, which they wanted very much. Having trust in the ECEC service and the ECEPs and having a sense that they wanted the very best for both children and families were strong enablers.

Feeling Judged

Many parents said they seek help reluctantly because they fear stigmatisation. They often felt anxious about the outcome for their child and were highly sensitive and vulnerable to criticism and fear that people may think they are not good enough as parents. Some felt compelled by their families and/or other services to seek help. Sometimes parents felt overwhelmed, stressed and under a lot of pressure. A family participant pointed out that an ECEP, in this case a psychologist:

> got me through the initial shock of discovering my child has issues, so a lot of things have happened and there has been a lot of personal stuff at home so I always know that if I ever needed to talk to someone I could call. Another good thing is early childhood intervention services do have psychologists that can come out and visit you specifically not just for the kids but for you and they don't judge you or your child, even if there are lots of issues.

Another participant explained:

> I am a single dad with two kids. I am divorced from the kids' mum and she has long-term mental health issues and uses drugs, so the pressure is on me to give my kids the best I can. I have been doing pretty well over the last couple of years but sometimes I yell at the kids and I am trying not to. I have learnt from watching the girls at the centre, some other ways to get the kids to behave and do what I ask, so that's been good for me. The girls at the centre know about my situation and they don't judge me and they have been very supportive. It's hard raising my kids as a man as there is a lot I don't know about. I trust the staff with my kids and there is a lot I am learning to do better from watching them.

Yet another commented, "before coming here I was at two other childcare centres and I didn't feel very welcome because they looked down their noses at me. They didn't even know my husband was in jail". When ECEPs assisted families with adult or child issues,

many shared a sense of relief that they could talk openly, and feel supported and accepted rather than judged.

Many families felt out of control and needed support but did not want staff to judge them or their family life and tell them that they are wrong and that the ECEPs are right. Most families stressed that having an ECEP who is a good listener and non-judgemental was an important enabler. It seemed that attitudes and perceptions about families and expectations of parenting in society was a continuing concern. Families repeatedly said they, "felt misunderstood" in many social situations and, "wanted to be supported not judged". A mother participant described, "I am ashamed about my circumstances", as she had to sleep in a car. Another person said, "the people at kinder are nice to me and to my daughter, but I feel embarrassed I don't have all the things I want for her. I see what other parents have for their kids". She indicated her desire for her children to have the same opportunities but sometimes these things were hard to provide, even if it was something others might take for granted such as a new pair of shoes.

One participant was relieved that her maternal health nurse was very caring and supportive as:

> she teaches me a lot about being a mum and how to help my daughter's development. She doesn't judge me like other people do, and she wants to help me. I know I have a lot to learn and I try hard. She has helped me find a playgroup and I have been to it a few times, but I feel nervous when I go there and worried that they might think I am not a good mum.

Perceptions of being judged meant that developing relationships with others was difficult and hard to establish the trust needed for a successful relationship.

A Sense of Belonging and Combating Isolation

Feeling a sense of belonging was correlated with inclusive environments, effective communication, and having a voice. As one family participant mentioned, "it's nice to be able to talk to someone that can understand the frustration I'm feeling". A place to belong is a service that is, "safe [and] no one judging anybody". The participants considered that the ECEC services could foster a sense of inclusion and of belonging but many spoke about the barriers that they had found previously. For example, one person said, "in the past I found it

hard to want to mingle with the other parents because they were in [a] different situation to me". Participants wanted to be with others who were experiencing similar challenges. They wanted a place and opportunity to mix with other parents while their children similarly mingled and played. When families found opportunities to meet other parents who might understand and share common experiences they felt less isolated and more accepted. Strategies to provide a space or group might include coffee facilities and somewhere informal to chat. One group of mothers had become friends and were going out to dinner once a month. Social engagement and a sense of belonging as an enabler could be fostered. Similarly, early childhood playgroup sessions were considered quite helpful because then, "we had the chance to meet other parents who were also in early intervention."

Opportunities to meet with other peers in a protected space for both the family and child was considered significantly important. ECEPs could facilitate effective communication and support relationship building in which parents/families felt comfortable sharing their lives with others. One participant noted, "the support of the teachers [educators] has just been fantastic. They were more than happy to go out of their way to help and support me because I'm unfamiliar starting again". When parenting could be shared with other families it meant that they were not just a parent on their own. Participating in groups with peers gave families a greater sense of inclusion and belonging. Participants felt understood and welcomed. Feelings of peer acceptance were heightened when families had something in common to share. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of being themselves and not having to hide who they were and what their circumstances were.

Establishing relationships and a sense of belonging is the key to reducing feelings of isolation. One participant mentioned, the importance of, "talking with staff who I love". Many families indicated the desire to have social opportunities but sometimes due to life circumstances meant that they could feel isolated. One participant said, "My husband is in jail and we don't have much family support ... We go and visit him in jail, but I am lonely and not coping very well. I am unhappy being on my own with just my kids". Without positive relationships built around understanding it was seen to be difficult for families to connect with other families and ECEPs leaving them feeling excluded and alone. Examples of strategies for overcoming social isolation were mentioned. Home visits and outreach services were frequently identified as very valuable. Many people appreciated the fact that an early intervention worker or psychologist could, "come to our house too if we can't make it there". Assistance in understanding and navigating the system and accessing information and

services were seen as enablers to combat isolation. For example, one participant mentioned, "it probably helps to just have someone that knows about the service history and someone that knows your situation to say, okay this you can apply for". It could be something as simple as accessing transport. One participant explained that transport was a major problem for her in accessing services and the ECEP helped her, "find a car service that was able to pick me up and take me to my appointments". Participants also felt that money could be a barrier to a sense of inclusion. When activities were free or less expensive access was easier.

A trusted ECEP could provide guidance and support in a range of matters such as new referral pathways, which were really important for families dealing with multiple issues. ECEPs could look at the whole picture for the family, including knowing the system, providing information, and consistently supporting children and their families, fostering belonging, and combatting social isolation. This was complex and involved building strong relationships between ECEPs and vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Mental health problems, social isolation, learning difficulties, family violence and relationship problems were just some of the factors shared in interviews that could isolate families, complicate parenting and make relationships with ECEPs difficult. In almost every interview, the parent/s communicated they wanted the best for their child. Such difficulties, often complex and comorbid, meant that combating both feelings and actual isolation were large barriers to the ECEC process. They highlighted wanting access to help and support once trust and rapport was built. They often spoke about feeling isolated and judged and considered that open, welcoming environments as being important to them.

Building Trust

Trust, warmth, empathy, caring, honest, sincere, supportive behaviours were all named by the families as critical in the relationship between themselves and the ECEP. These ideas overlap. Some parents expressed an initial wariness and distrust of ECEPs because of unhelpful or distressing encounters in the past. For participants, trust was based on feeling comfortable and secure. One grandmother explained that:

> it's having that security, it's having that comfort, it's having his family around, it's having other people come into our lives whether it be the kinder, the speech therapy, the doctor whoever has made him feel good. [The sexual assault unit] has made him comfortable enough to talk and open up; a lot of things have come into our lives that have been so positive for my [grandchild].

Families often described their key workers as a trusted member of the family or a friend. When trust was broken, both families and ECEPs felt betrayed. In one interview there was an animated discussion on this topic concerning how they felt that the Children's Courts manipulated people (children, families and professionals). This participant said that:

> It hurts and I'm angry and I'm frustrated and that's why I've lost confidence and I've lost respect a lot for the Children's Courts and the Department because they're not thinking about the children all the time, they don't listen to me, [the ECEP], or my child.

Without trust it was seen to be difficult to gain the full benefits of the ECEC environment. Families really valued, "being able to go there [the service] and have a room where they could come in and the kids could play and the parents supervise. Having a safe comfortable place to go, and meet up with other parents", were seen as positive. Some programs worked with children to build social and emotional skills, and helped them learn to trust others. Families participating in activities or groups with other families were seen to foster trust.

Family Perspectives on the ECEC Setting, ECEPs and Programs

For families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, successful service delivery often depended upon practical factors to access the services and practical help to maintain their involvement. One family participant mentioned that when they joined the ECEC setting, "we had no idea ... on what we were looking at". Many family participants felt that they needed training and education to help them learn about areas where they were experiencing challenges such as behavioural or developmental concerns for their child. Families saw communication and learning tools as keys to their early year's success. One participant underlined, "good communication [is best] because if no one is on the same page about something it's chaos and sometimes if information isn't taken seriously nothing gets done". Lack of time could interrupt communication and become a barrier. One parent described frustration with the, "limited amount of time we can actually see a therapist just because they may not have as many on hand or available". Another parent mentioned that they were given a, "plan of attack" to help them determine with the ECEPs what would help their child. This gave them confidence that they were able to solve some of their own problems.

Having a key worker/contact person they could trust was highlighted and seen as hugely important for many family participants. This meant that, "everything can be accessed through the one person, which is good". Administrative and financial support through ECEPs assistance made life easier, less complicated as one family participant mentioned that it was, "great when all the people writing the reports, learning plans and doing assessments worked from the one place". For one family with a child diagnosed with autism they were grateful to be, "helped with dealing with the final diagnosis", and the process of filling in papers, administrative, areas around financial assistance and support, which made life easier. Another participant was grateful that the ECEPs were flexible and understanding when she, "couldn't make an appointment—they don't get upset and mad and make you feel bad about it". Different families expressed different views on scheduling, some appreciated more routines and having a timetable, others preferred flexibility.

Many participants expressed the importance of ECEPs being friendly and approachable in the service. One participant noted, "when ECEPs are flexible and happy to really understand and learn about our child and our family and help out as best they can, their positive attitude means quality relationships can be established between us". Families felt that:

> strategies that have helped include staff being sensitive and respectful of their cultural backgrounds and building this into the program. Families felt that high staff changes and discontinuity of staff was unhelpful and complications could occur which made relationships difficult and unsupportive".

A respondent pointed out, "both my child and I become very unsettled and we don't like it when the regular staff aren't there at the centre.

Another participant also felt that when their child needed individual attention having, "extra staff to calm him down was helpful and this now means that my child can participate in the service without too much upheaval". Many parent participants mentioned that the person at the front desk in the various services was important and if they were welcoming and kind, this helped families feel good about coming regularly to the service and becoming fully involved. Positive relationships developed when, as one participant described, "staff at the door have gone out of their way when I arrive at the centre to make me feel at ease and take a genuine interest in my children". Another participant pointed out:

> the staff just handle stuff like helping me with filling in forms and reading notices without making me feel bad because I am not very good at reading or writing. The staff also helped me by getting a bag and a windcheater for my son to come into the service and help me with food for his lunch sometimes.

This practical support often resulted in less stress and complications for families so they could focus on other competing needs. Most families talked about and described staff as being, "very good at communicating and very kind and caring and they can put themselves in our shoes".

When parents were having difficulties with their own child/children, many families noted that ECEPs were able to help with ideas that worked for their child. One participant pointed out that, "they gave my husband and I some effective ways to see the issues with our daughter from different angles".

Another participant further explained:

> when my son got a bit older, all of a sudden I had to switch and change over to a different parenting style for him because of his learning needs and aggressive behaviours and the staff helped me with this and they gave an explanation about why he may be doing this, and then I started seeing it clearer and said okay, I have to change my ways with him and I have to do this for my son. I then realised why he was having so many meltdowns and what could help him and he had more issues than what I thought. A lot has happened to him and to me with family violence and abuse in our house that happened for a long time.

The ECEPs were able to support parents to learn new skills through sensitive communication and supportive guidance.

Programs

Many families identified the importance of receiving information about all of the local services and supports available to them and to their children and how difficult it was to find out about other programs and services, which could be limited. A participant said, "I don't think there are many playgroups for young mums like me". Another participant noted:

> If it wasn't for the staff at childcare, I wouldn't have known about playgroup to attend with my younger child. I just didn't know where to look and I didn't see this service advertised anywhere or know what days and times it was running.

A respondent stated, "before I started with the maternal and child health nurse, I didn't know where the closest pre-school was or how I could enrol my child". Another participant pointed out that, "receiving information earlier and having contacts that were local were important for me to know what was needed and when it was needed for my girls".

Most families stated, they needed services that were local to where they lived and needed to be flexible in hours, affordable—meaning specifically low cost services or free. One participant said:

> I don't feel like the staff look down their nose at me when I am always late to the program. They just ask me about my son and how things are going and they don't blame me if my son is still in his pyjamas or if I haven't put his lunch in his bag because I have nothing in the cupboard to give him that day.

Families valued flexibility in programs but felt that their child did not always cope well with changing arrangements. Finding and settling into the right group/program was important; feeling comfortable for the child enabled learning and socialising. Education was considered vital and the families were grateful to find out how to access it. One person explained that she had changed her approach to seeking opportunities and support, "I never used to ask for help but now I am like I need to because if I don't ask for help I can't help him get the education that he needs". Socialising, together with education, was raised consistently as being substantially important.

Concluding Remarks

Respectful, supportive relationships were critical to the success of ECEC services for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Effective relationships underpinned all engagement and decision-making about the child and their family. Participants wanted to be listened to without judgement and feel heard, accepted and involved by ECEPs as partners in decision-making. All families sought a sense of connection and belonging and these were correlated with being in inclusive welcoming environments, where there was good communication, acceptance of diversity and that families felt and did have a voice in the

service. Families thought it was essential to build trust with their ECEPs so that they and their children felt supported and cared for. They also highlighted the need to have opportunities and time to spend with a familiar consistent key worker or contact person; to speak openly with them about their issues and particular circumstances, with empathy and understanding. The desire for more opportunities for families to meet with other families permeated the responses. Families wanted to meet others in similar situations so they would feel understood. Essentially all aspects of relationship building seemed to be the key to overcoming isolation, feeling included, and having a place where families and children felt they belong. Families needed information about the services and supports available to them and practical help and flexibility in ECEC services that were local and affordable. Families identified many factors that made them feel vulnerable and stressed including, limited income, health and wellbeing related issues, lack of social and family supports, relationship issues, issues with finances, transport and housing and generally making ends meet. In almost every interview, the parent/s communicated they wanted the best for their child.

Supportive behaviours such as trust, warmth and empathy along with spending time getting to know families, developing authentic relationships and showing respect for the families diverse backgrounds, values and beliefs were all seen as very important.

CHAPTER 7: THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

This chapter will present the data collected from the children via their narratives/statements and drawings, which gives voice and presence to those at the centre of the study. For many people, "the prevailing view of childhood is of innocence, immaturity and naivety," and childhood is often seen as, "the Golden Age of Life" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 21). This life stage should be celebrated, as a time of rich learning and a time of growth for the child. It is essential to involve families and provide a special place and space for children to fulfil all they can be. For many children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, this time is permeated with complex circumstances and factors where every day they may experience conflicts and struggles. This can result in children not being able to benefit from their ECEC setting as having their learning needs met, was often a lower priority in the family hierarchy of needs. It was anticipated that the children's drawings and commentaries might reflect negative influences in their lives. As will be evident from the data this was rarely the case. This study sought to discover how meaning making within relationships can be seen in enacting trust and empathy between ECEPs, children, and their families. The research focuses on the role of communication in relationships and recognises that relationships play a large and active part in promoting a child's early experiences. Relationship building is part of a scaffolding process where ECEPs work with a child to improve their learning experience. The data in this chapter reveals children's experiences in ECEC settings, and offers an additional lens on the phenomenon under consideration. In the visual and verbal data included in this chapter, there is reference to relationships with family, friends and ECEPs.

In this study it is important to include the voice of children. This is an ethical imperative as individual children can shape their own identities. Not only are we shaped by our environment, but we are able to determine our identities and choose our actions. Free agency and being part of decision-making is an element of discovering who we are and how we interact in our relationships with other people. That sense of agency can and needs to be taught, developed and encouraged. This research attempts to capture the participants sense of self, specifically in this chapter, the children's experience in the ECEC setting. To do this necessitates that the researcher adopts an attitude and approach that is open and accepting of

participants' experiences represented in their narratives and drawings. In the Early Years Learning Framework (2009) it is asserted that:

> Children have a strong sense of identity; children feel safe, secure, and supported; children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency; children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities; children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect. (p. 21)

The best practice ECEC settings create the platform to facilitate the development of these attributes.

As discussed more fully in the Methodology the drawings and narratives were collected individually and children had the option of drawing more than one image if they so wished. Once collected the children's drawings were analysed, and placed into thematic groups or clusters (Southcott & Cosaitis, 2015). The researcher intentionally undertook data collection via the drawings and accompanying narratives to harness the child's ability to have their own voice and to participate in the research with free agency and decision-making. The questions were purposely open ended and also stayed true to the notion of Husserl's (1970), "performance of the epoché" (p. 235), which was used in the other data collection in this research through interviews with ECEPs and families but with careful consideration of the child's world and being authentic to these notions of trust and empowerment.

Data Findings

In the analysis of the children's drawings most images depicted relationships and positive feelings. These often represented specific facilities and activities. All images except two were positive and these will be discussed below. The drawings by children aged less than three years were not representational and did not depict tangible, identifiable objects so they were impossible for the researcher to interpret therefore the drawings didn't provide strong evidence, although the researcher now concedes that perhaps the verbal label may have provided strong narratives/statements.. The drawings by the children aged three to eight years were often easier to decipher particularly if explanatory narratives were included. For this reason the drawings and their commentaries are combined. Most of the decipherable drawings represented concrete objects with a few pictures of fantasy images (fairies and the child travelling inside a flower). There were two outliers which indicated less positive moods and feelings, one relating to hunger (with this need being met by the ECEC service on an ad hoc

basis), and the other outlier was a picture of an angry dinosaur intimating a feeling of exclusion that was related to the child's belief that his brother was receiving more attention than he was in all circumstances. According to Afolayan (2015) positive and negative responses in drawing analysis may correlate with a positive and negative sense of self. Drawings and the accompanying narratives can offer insight into understanding the life-worlds of the children such as those that participated in the drawing exercises. Afolayan (2015) explained that drawings could contain indicators of adaptive positive adjustment including, "a child's positive self-perception, self-efficacy, agency, social involvement with others, and overall functioning", while others included maladaptive indicators of, "aggression or possible dysfunctions as projected in the children's drawings, such as anger, aggression, violence, emotional constriction, withdrawal, sexual violations, and denials" (p. 44).

Data Collection Strategies

The children participating in the drawing activity gave their assent through an age appropriate form and via agreement through their families who also participated in this research study conducted at the Knox City Council services in Outer East Melbourne. After the researcher introduced herself, the children were asked if they would like to do a drawing about their specific ECEC service and their feelings about attending this service. The researcher explained, "If you are okay to do this, tick the happy face and if you do not want to do this tick the unhappy face." All children who participated in the drawing activity picked the ticked the happy face. As a pre-cursor to the drawing the children were asked to point to one of four images of children's faces showing; happy, sad, angry or excited, to indicate their feeling. This was to overcome their hesitancy in naming feelings. All children pointed to happy when asked about their ECECs. The children were asked to speak about their drawings by the researcher and their statements were transcribed. The researcher then asked each child the following questions about how they feel about coming to kinder/childcare/play group/family day care/early intervention, "Could you draw a picture for me of your [specific named service] and how you feel about coming to this specific [kinder/childcare/play group/family day care/early intervention] group? On completion of the drawings and narratives the researcher then explained to the children, "We would like to borrow your picture and copy it and we will give your picture back to you".

Limitations to the interpretation of the data collected occurred in how far the drawings could be interpreted as the three year olds and under did not draw or depict tangible or

identifiable objects. Their use of colour did not appear to be significant. This was evident from their accompanying narratives. One child happily did put dots all over the page but this was not indicative of anger, rather it was an enjoyment of drawing dots. It was also decided that images by the fifty-three children represented the gamut of understandings as saturation was reached at about twenty-four. There was considerable consistency in the subjects of the drawings and the commentaries.

Drawing can, "evoke reflections, which in turn are connected to lived experience ... as a form of language, it can be interpreted" (Alerby, 2015, p. 16). This chapter presents the images, narratives and the understandings of the fifty-three children of the families, who participated in this study. Understanding lived experiences is essential as it allows the researcher a window into the life-world of an individual or group. Within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach and in understanding the narratives of children and their drawings, alongside their age, developmental level and stage of their art work, "there is a wish to try to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 7). The use of drawings as data is well established in IPA as children's images can facilitate, "research on subjective experiences" (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011, p. 313).

It is further interesting to note, that most of the drawings were concrete, with little metaphorical or representational symbolic images being represented. Collecting a second drawing from each of the child participants may have added a temporal perspective, because a drawing on another day may have told a different story. In future research the researcher may also consider using an additional methodology for a deeper analysis of the drawings according to developmentally appropriate stages of cognitive and emotional development. It is possible the child might not be challenged, and such things as imagination, psychological development, and their inner sense of self may not have developed to their biological age and perhaps this level has not yet been achieved. From this small-scale collection of data, it was difficult to ascertain psychological development, an area of focus be more aptly addressed by a psychologist.

The Images and Accompanying Narratives

As stated, the children drew concrete objects and events such as travelling to their kinder/childcare, ECEC services, via car or train, the sort of activities they undertake; the

outdoors, nature, playgrounds, friends, family and fantasy pictures including fairies. Many of the drawings presented a concrete understanding of researcher questions. When asked about coming to the service they drew pictures such as a car, train, walking, and for some others, more metaphorical travelling via a flower or fairy. While there is a, "connection to place" (Brown & Johnson, 2015, p. ix) and the, "sharing of stories" (Brown & Johnson, 2015, p. ix) that brings people together it is also reflective of the contexts in which we live. For the purposes of this study the research context is around the children's experience attending and spending time at their ECEC service; the connection to people, place, and experience is relevant here.

> Place and orientation are important aspects of human experience. Place evokes geography and culture and conjures up history and myth. Place is not only a particular physical location but an idea, a mental construction that captures and directs the human relationship to the world. (MacDonald, 2003, p. 1)

These children's connections were often around activities, fun and play, the buildings and its surroundings, within this enriched context of learning, being, growing and developing. Activities showed mostly positive experiences around playing, being in the sandpit, under the umbrella, on the slide. Children's drawings illustrated excitement, happiness and fun. As mentioned earlier, there were two negative drawings, one of a dinosaur that represented frustration with a sibling, and one of a banana that was about being hungry. Interestingly whilst other data collected in this research indicated that there might be a lot going on at home, within the complexity of the family and family relationship—there was a surprisingly positive and consistent indication of moods and emotions such as happiness and enjoyment—they used such words as love, like, fun and excitement. There was no specific reference to gender other than the drawing of self as a girl in a dress or a boy in t-shirt and shorts. The childrens' narratives/statements tell a story and comments such as, "I am good at messy painting" show a strong sense of self.

The pictures are clustered under nine themes: Family, Friends, People/ECEPs, Emotions and Moods, Facilities, Exterior/Outside, Interior/Inside, Activities, Travelling to the service, Learning and Playing, and Outliers.

As many children chose to represent several things in the one drawing, the frequency of particular images will add up to more than the number of participants.

1. Family, Friends, People/ECEPsr

Image 1.1 Child 4 years old

Image 1.1 Child's statement: "This is me at kinder"

Image 1.2 Child 5 years old

Image 1.2 Child's Statement: "My sister S takes me to childcare and she helps in the office and plays with me"

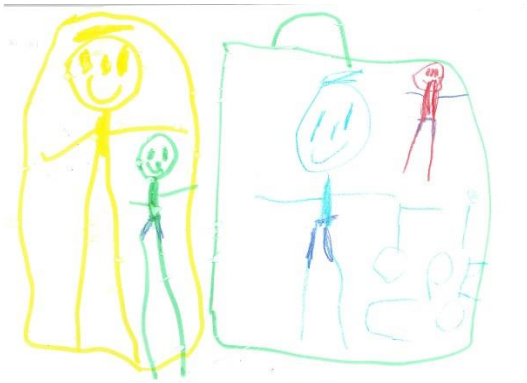


Image 1.3 Child 4 years old

Image 1.3 Child's Statement: "These are all my friends at kinder. I am a lucky boy"

Image 1.4 Child 4 year old

Image 1.4 Child's Statement: "That's my teacher and that's me and that's my friend"

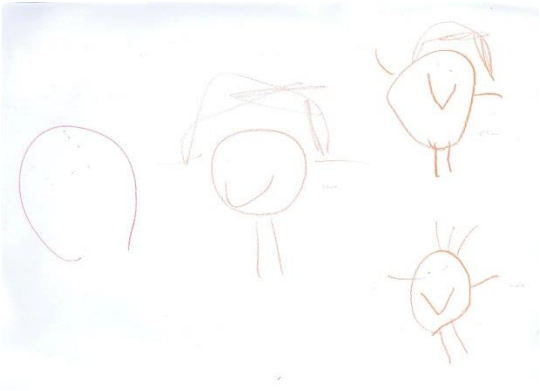


Image 1.5 Child 4 year old

Image 1.5 Child's Statement: "That's my brother going with my mum. That's me. I am at kinder. I love camping. This is a red tent. I love playing in the tent inside"

Image 1.6 Child 5 years old

Image 1.6 Child's Statement: "I love to draw my mum at childcare. I am drawing my mum. She speaks Serbian. I am good at messy paintings and my mum loves my paintings.

Image 1.7 Child 5 year old

Image 1.7 Child's Statement: "This is me and this is a skeleton and this is a treasure map"

Image 1.8 Child 5 year old

Image 1.8 Child's Statement: "I love drawing my teacher"

Image 1.9 Child 4 year old

Image 1.9 Child's Statement: This is a picture of you (the teacher) and a rainbow. I like to draw beautiful things for my teacher.

Image 1.10 Child 3 year old

Image 1.10 Child's Statement: "See, this is me at my childcare"

2. Emotions and moods

Image 2.1 Child 8 year old

Image 2.1 Child's statement: "In Kindergarten I was very lonely but after a while I met some friends and got happier and happier and have funny friends. In childcare I really had no friends and all I would do is play be myself or maybe if we do a group activity I would get shy and wouldn't really get to know the other kids"

Image 2.2 Child 8 year old

Image 2.2 Child's Statement: "In kindergarten I was very lonely but after a while I met some friends and I got happier and had funny friends"

Image 2.3 Child 8 year old

Image 2.3 Child's Statement: "I like it when I have friends to play with"

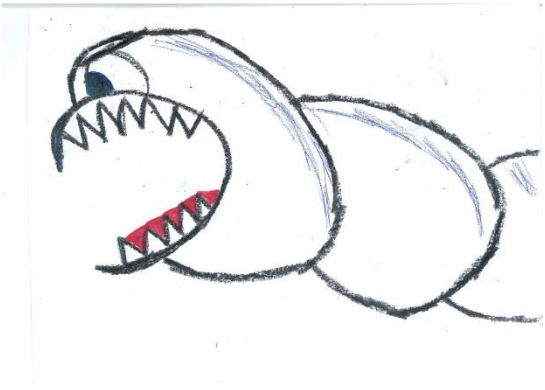


Image 2.4 Child 7 year old

Image 2.4 Child's Statement: "This is a random dinosaur this is how I feel sometimes I feel frustrated because I don't get what I need. I sometimes feel left out it is sometimes hard because my brother gets his way but I don't get my way"

Image 2.5 Child 4 year old

Image 2.5 Child's Statement: "That's me having a happy face and they are the blue hills like my kinder. I feel really excited today"

Image 2.6 Child 6 year old

Image 2.6 Child's Statement: "I am happy here and I have fun"

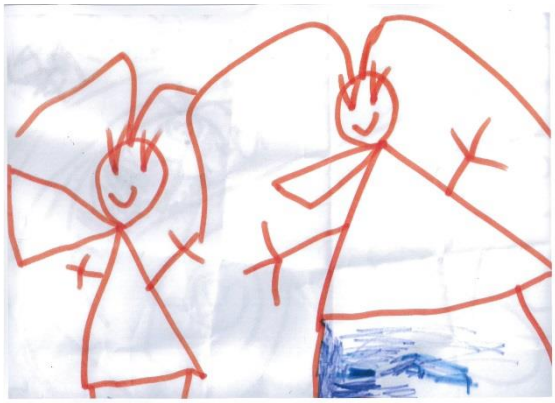


Image 2.7 Child 5 year old

Image 2.7 Child's Statement: "I love my best friend"

Image 2.8 Child 4 year old

Image 2.8 Child's Statement: " We are happy here"

3. Facilities

Image 3.1 Child 6 year old

Image 3.1 Child's Statement: "It is a picture of my centre. I feel happy because they teached me with some stuff. The sun is shining and there is green grass growing. There are 2 red pillars in the playground. I call them pills for short. Outside it is all wonderful. Inside is warm. Inside its big with lots of rooms. Some rooms we get to play in. Some rooms we get to make stuff in. My [name of professional] is wonderful and she

Image 3.2 Child 4 year old

Image 3.2 Child's Statement: "This is my childcare place and I love painting the best"

is having a baby and she teaches me things like learning.

4. Exterior/Outside

Image 4.1 Child 4 year old

Image 4.1 Child's statement: "I always play in the sandpit outside. This is the lovely blue sky and we have an umbrella to sit under. "

Image 4.2 Child 5 year old

Image 4.2 Child's Statement: "I run and catch the butterflies in the playground out there"

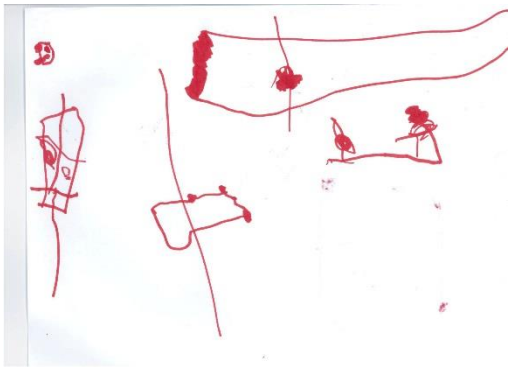


Image 4.3 Child 4 year old

Image 4.3 Child's Statement: "I like playing with cars and watching aeroplanes"

Image 4.4 Child 6 year old

Image 4.4 Child's Statement: "I love being outside and playing on the slide and in the rocket ship climbing frame and playing with my new friends"

Image 4.5 Child 3 year old

Image 4.5 Child's Statement: "These are beautiful leaves in the outside yard"

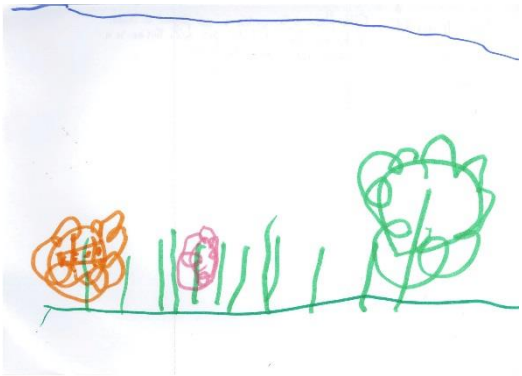


Image 4.6 Child 4 year old

Image 4.6 Child's Statement: "I like flowers in the garden in our playground at childcare. This is an orange sunflower with seeds in the middle"

Image 4.7 Child 4 year old

Image 4.7 Child's Statement: "I like drawing stars and the moon and I like to play the game who catches the stars and who goes to the moon. Dad and mum and grandma bring me to childcare. I stay here very late"

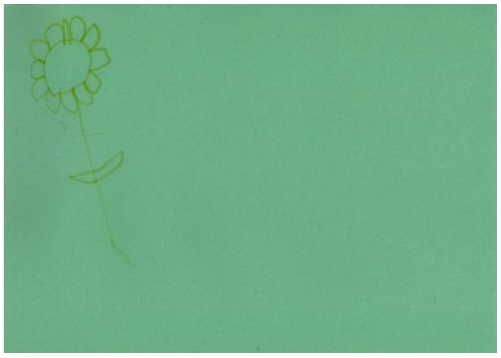


Image 4.8 Child 4 year old

Image 4.8 Child's Statement: "I love my kinder and I am happy"

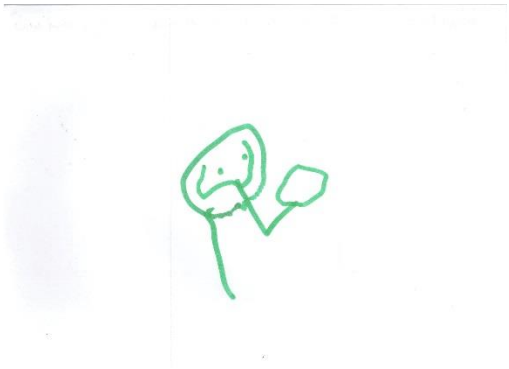


Image 4.9 Child 4 year old

Image 4.9 Child's Statement: "I like kicking the ball at childcare in the playground outside. It's great fun"

Image 4.10 Child 5 year old

Image 4.10 Child's Statement: "I am drawing a butterfly because I am coming to kinder"

Image 4.11 Child 4 year old

Image 4.11 Child's Statement: "I like being outside. This is the door to go outside. This is the sandpit. This is the water. My friends are playing zombie"

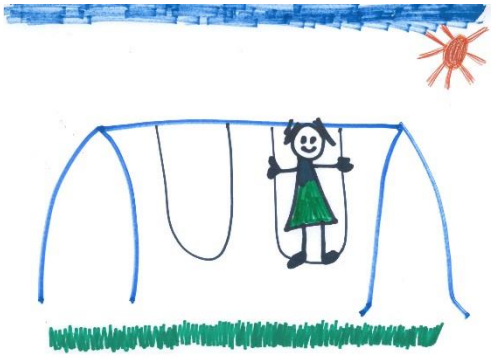


Image 4.12 Child 6 year old

Image 4.12 Child's Statement: "I am standing on the swing outside in the playground near my kinder"

Image 4.13 Child 5 year old

Image 4.13 Child's Statement: "I love picking flowers in the garden at kinder with my friend"

Image 4.14 Child 5 year old

Image 4.14 Child's Statement: "My favourite thing is running on the paths outside"

5. Interior/Inside

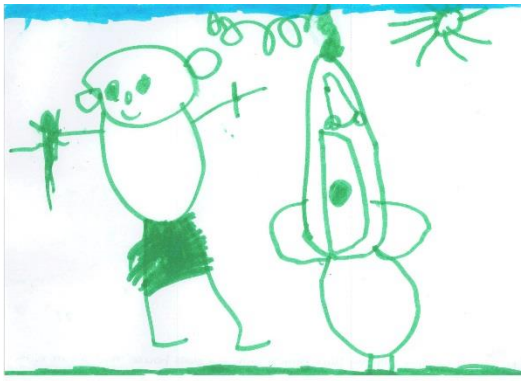


Image 5.1 Child 5 year old

Image 5.1 Child's Statement: "This is me with my skirt playing with the dolls house"

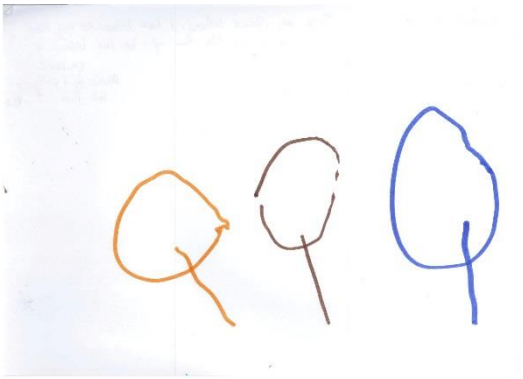


Image 5.2 Child 4 year old

Image 5.2 Child's Statement: "These are coloured balloons. I have balloons at my house and I can blow them up. We have balloons at childcare sometimes for a party. It's fun"

Image 5.3 Child 4 year old

Image 5.3 Child's Statement: "I like to build things with Lego. That's Lego Steve"

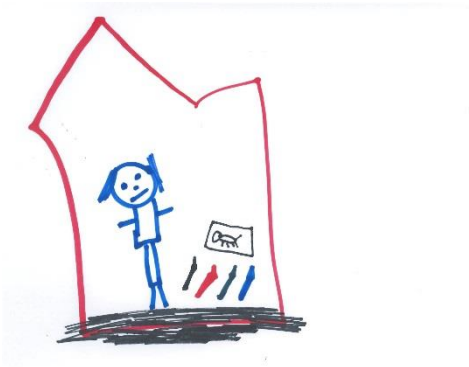


Image 5.4 Child 6 year old

Image 5.4 Child's Statement: "I love my childcare place and I love drawing at the drawing table in the corner"

Image 5.5 Child 4 year old

Image 5.5 Child's Statement: "I like eating banana's and apples from the kitchen at kinder. I am hungry and I don't have breakfast"

6. Activities

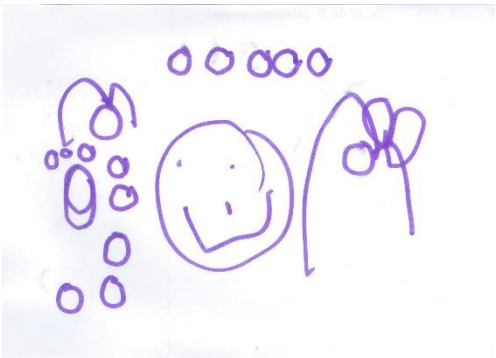


Image 6.1 Child 4 year old

Image 6.1 Child's Statement: "I like to do painting"

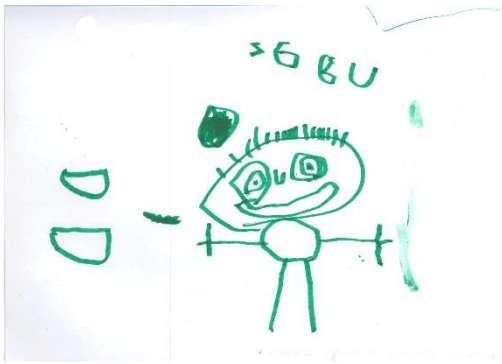


Image 6.2 Child 4 year old

Image 6.2 Child's Statement: "Drawing is fun at my carers house"

Image 6.3 Child 5 year old

Image 6.3 Child's Statement: "I like to read books at kinder and my teacher reads us stories"

Image 6.4 Child 5 year old

Image 6.4 Child's Statement: "That's me with the puzzles and me on the swing"

Image 6.5 Child 4 year old

Image 6.5 Child's Statement: "This is the playdough table and I love playdough. This is me with my friend".

Image 6.6 Child 5 year old

Image 6.6 Child's Statement: "I love playing playdough at kinder too"

7. Travelling to the service

Image 7.1 Child 4 year old

Image 7.1 Child's Statement: "This is my car driving here to kinder. There is Spiderman in my car"

Image 7.2 Child 4 year old

Image 7.2 Child's Statement: "This is a train. I catch a train to kinder with my brother. My dad sometimes drives me in his car"

Image 7.3 Child 4 year old

Image 7.3 Child's Statement: "I am coming to kinder in a flower and the flower has fairies in it. See the fairy right at the top. Can you see that Fairy. Can you see it."

Image 7.4 Child 4 year old

Image 7.4 Child's Statement: "I am happy to go to my kinder and I walk with my dad here. This is my house and it's got a fence and these are my plants. I walk through the playground with my dad to get to my kinder. The blue is where I walk to my kinder with my dad."

8. Learning and playing

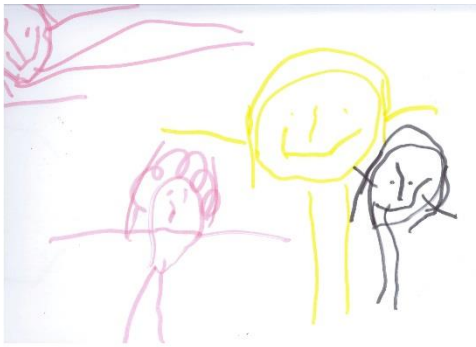


Image 8.1 Child 4 years old

Image 8.1 Child's Statement: "I love playing with my friends here. We have fun"

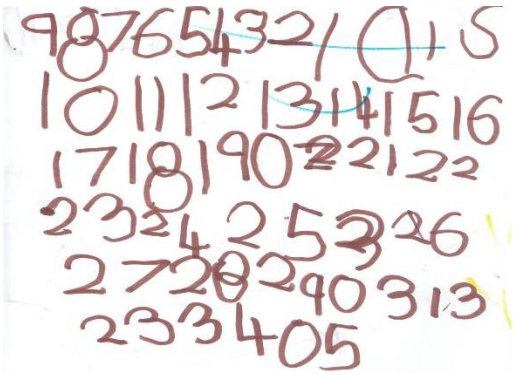


Image 8.2 Child 5 year old

Image 8.2 Child's Statement: "I like to do numbers. I have learnt lots of numbers"

Image 8.3 Child 4 year old

Image 8.4 Child 5 year old

Image 8.3 Child's Statement: "I love using the letter stencil at the drawing table"

Image 8.4 Child's Statement: "I have lots of fun playing with my friends at kinder."

9. Outliers

Image 9.1 Child 4 year old

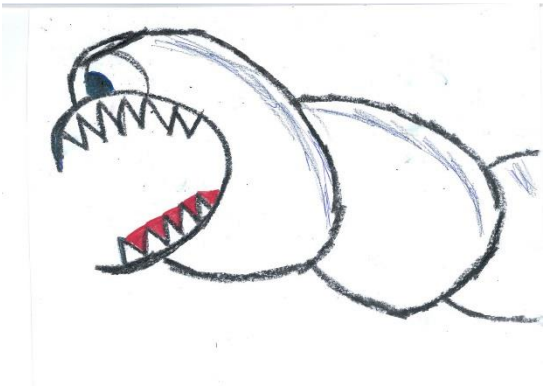


Image 9.2 Child 7 year old

Image 9.1 Child's Statement: "I like eating banana's and apples from the kitchen at kinder. I am hungry and I don't have breakfast"

Image 9.2 Child's Statement: "This is a random dinosaur this is how I feel sometimes I feel frustrated because I don't get what I need. I sometimes feel left out it is sometimes hard because my brother gets his way but I don't get my way"

While the family had stressors the children did not seem affected adversely demonstrating in their drawings and narratives, positive moods and happiness at ECECs. This may link to the fact that children live in the moment and the response characterises an ECEC

service providing a successful, safe, secure, predictable, flexible and individualised learning environment. The ECEC staff across different services identified that many of them were long-term employees, indicating a low staff turn-over, and ECEPs expressed being happy and satisfied in their jobs, and indicated in their interviews that they were open to learning.

Analysis

Denotation and connotation. Southcott and Cosaitis (2015) indicate that, "Denotation is the literal meaning of a drawing and connotation comes from the representational and emotional meaning" (Feinstein, 1982; Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kaomea 2003) (p. 82). The images that could be interpreted in this study of children's drawings were denotative as shown through realistic responses to questions regarding their experience of their ECEC setting. This study also sought out the responses of children about their feelings towards attending ECEC services. Reality was represented in concrete forms of feelings and emotions around the drawings, for example, describing their experiences in their ECEC setting by using words representing their feelings, such as, happiness, love, and like with pictures showing a sunny sky, happy faces, the playground, slides—feel-good, positive and emotional responses. Most drawings represented concrete rather than symbolic realities, except for the two outliers and the picture of a fairy and flower as their response, to coming to the ECEC setting.

Limitations of drawing analysis. While the drawings showed realistic representations as Brown and Johnson (2015) note, "it is also of importance to be responsive to the fact that the use of images, such as drawings, as a research method, in some cases may not be fruitful". On the face of it the drawings and narratives were consistent with the childhood experience at the ECEC setting being very positive and showing happy, well-adjusted children within a, "brain-enriched classroom" (Rushton, Rushton & Larkin, 2010, p. 353). This may mean that within the growth and potential of the children, they are a part of a setting that allows for the strengths of play and learning to come to the fore.

Understanding Children

It is believed that, "resiliency or life skills and personal attributes also known as protective factors" (T. Cox, 2000, p. 87) can be taught or made part of the learning process within the curriculum. Curriculum here is understood to include all that occurs in an ECEC service. This is not just the teaching but encompasses the environment, the games, the

experiences and activities, the opportunities to play, all of which give children the space and time to develop self agency. The curriculum contains outcomes that are related to cognitive, developmental, social and emotional; these are at the core of value-based early childhood teaching. In ECEC settings time and space for play are essential. Careful scaffolding of play is necessary in effective early childhood education. For while:

> play is a context for learning it … allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness—enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity—enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning—assists children to develop relationships and concepts—stimulates a sense of wellbeing" (Australian Government, DET, 2013, p. 9).

The Silent and Invisible in Children's Drawings

The notion of the silent and invisible is present in everyday discourse and can include body gestures, tone of voice, attitudes and present in everyday situations and relationships. In collecting this data, it was evident in tone of voice and body language that the children were keen to share their experiences and how they felt. Attending ECEC was a positive experience reflected in the images, the narratives, and the enthusiasm with which these were presented. One child insisted on drawing a number of images and sharing them. Another child brought his drawing from the ECEC setting and proudly requested that it be displayed. There was no hesitancy in their image making or talking. The researcher held some preconceived ideas that this may not be the case. Preconceptions such as mine, are thought provoking as attitudes, perceptions and values are the grounds, a very real part, of what interactions are built upon. Further drawings, expressions not bound by such rules as verbal or written communication, can represent these invisible concepts and is why such methodologies offer a unique perspective. Looking at the positive emotions of these children who appeared to be thriving in the ECEC context was almost surprising. As researcher I was amazed that these children did not appear to be affected by their family histories and home circumstances. I wondered if the ECEC setting offers a protected place and space for children and their families, to escape from their stressors, drawing on the protective and resilience factors the ECEC setting is nurturing to provide a strong foundation for families and to help develop happy and well-adjusted children.

Discussion

Within the Ecological perspective the ECEC setting can broaden a child's context and can present a safe and protected space. ECEC settings proved to be delivering a successful service, indicated through the positive emotions, moods and words the children narrated and drew. Essentially verbatim transcription occurred; what has been quoted as the words of the children is honest and not contrived, open and direct. Children enthusiastically shared themselves indicating happiness and excitement at the ECEC setting, revelling in discovery, activities, peer friendships, being outdoors, playing and the relationships they have with their ECEPs. The children studied were considered in the context of their families who were experiencing significant disadvantage and vulnerability; the individual child's responses were correlated with the families' responses. It may be that the children experience the same positive emotions in their home environment; this supposition however is outside the scope of this study and to date, not explored by the researcher. Apart from image 2.I the researcher could not see negative emotional residue in their drawings, which suggests that the child's wellbeing may well be cocooned in both the ECEC context and outside of it. It would be spurious to think that the ECEC setting is unflawed and the child's home is flawed.

In collecting this data, it was anticipated that the children would not be as happy as they appeared to be. Oomar (2008) argues that there is a, "widespread underestimation of the abilities and potential of these children, creating a vicious cycle of under-expectation, underachievement and low priority in the allocation of resources" (p. 2). It appears that the children in this study were not underestimated by their ECEPs. The children delighted in opportunities to play, move around in the facilities, exploring the world of the interior, and exterior at the ECEC setting. It could be suggested that the ECEC setting might compare favourably with the child's context outside, in the home and the wider community.

There are a number of conclusions that may be drawn between the children's responsiveness in the ECEC setting that intimate that the distance and attention they receive in a positive ECEC setting, pushing their family stressors into the background, giving them a context in which they feel safe and free from the complications of their life outside of ECEC.

The data responds to the fact that some families feel they may be judged, due to their disadvantage and their perceptions are that other people, the community and some services deem them as less than adequate parents. In reality their children seem to be cared for, happy,

and loved, although this contention may be more aptly analysed by a specialist with expertise in this area. Most family participants expressed feelings of wanting the very best for their children. These are double positives support the families' views that they are good parents, that they love, care for and nurture their children amongst all their difficulties. It also highlights that people/community judgments may be misguided in many cases and the evidence is in the child's learning, development, wellbeing, and positive disposition.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the children's drawings presented with mostly tangible and relatable objects showing happy feelings, relationships and experiences. While many were not representational, particularly the under 3 year olds, which limited the analysis, it seems that it can be said that the children were happy, cared for and nourished with positive experiences at home and at the ECEC settings. This may in many cases contradict thoughts around vulnerable and disadvantaged families being perceived and judged as bad parents, leaving aside those families where there are child protection issues. The notion that the ECEC setting is doing its job to provide a safe, happy, and enriching setting for the children who participated in this study is supported by the data.

Analysis of children's drawings and accompanying commentary revealed quite concrete responses and understandings. Almost all children provided happy images regardless of their families stressors, which were determined through correlating information from the families using the ECE services.

When analysing children's drawings the researcher was aware of one's own pre-understandings of the studied phenomenon. The researcher had anticipated that the children's drawings and commentaries might reflect negative influences in their lives and was aware of their thinking about this. However, this was rarely the case.

From the children's perspectives, the ECEC settings were delivering a successful service, indicated through the positive emotions and moods shown in the words the children used and what they drew. Their narratives matched their drawings very closely which is not always the case in data collected from children in this way. The children were happy to be at their ECEC setting and drew pictures that they were happy and added narratives and opinions to the same effect. The childrens' friendships with their peers was highlighted as important to them along with their relationships with their families and ECEPs.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research study analysed the key enablers and barriers to engagement from the lived experience perspective of Early Childhood Educators and Professionals (ECEPs) and vulnerable and disadvantaged families and their children. It sought to discover, ***What are the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children, including those with disabilities and their families, in accessing, maintaining engagement and successfully learning and developing within an educational program?*** The research evidence regarding vulnerable and disadvantaged families and how best to meet their needs, is limited (Moore, 2010), and there are very few studies that provide evidence relating to effective methods of engaging vulnerable families (Katz et al., 2007). This study has provided opportunities to genuinely listen to the voices of children and families living in situations of adversity and to genuinely listen to the experiences of the ECEPs who support them in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in the local context of the Knox Municipality in Outer East Melbourne, Victoria. In this locale there are significant populations of vulnerability and disadvantage with diverse factors affecting social inclusion, access, participation, and engagement of families in ECEC services. Addressing these enablers and barriers is essential for successful ECEC for vulnerable children and their families. All the ECEP participants in my study recognised and discussed the importance of social equity, supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, and were keen to understand the role they could best play in addressing these issues.

The approach to the data collected was intentionally open ended to allow the data to speak for itself and to engender rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon at hand. To achieve a better ECEC experience the data showed that there was a need for stronger relationships between the two stakeholders, which include ECEPs for their practice wisdom and their desire for more PD and engagement around partnerships, collaboration, communication, and for families to be respected for their motivations and sharing in the decision-making around their child's education and care.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (2011), asserts that children learn in the context of their families and these families are the primary influence on the learning and development of their children. For parents it is essential that

they provide opportunities for play within home environments that encourage learning. Parents' provision of a core set of protective factors for their children can strongly predict positive outcomes including relational skills, self-regulation, problem-solving and involvement in positive activities. These factors can protect even the most highly vulnerable children and families from negative trajectories (ACYF, 2013). Conversely, there is a core set of risk factors that can include the absence of positive attachment and warm family relationships, poor parenting behaviors, such as harsh and inconsistent discipline, limited cognitive stimulation, parental mental health, family violence or substance abuse, and community factors such as unsafe and unsupported neighborhoods and education settings, social isolation and poverty (ACYF, 2013). The interaction of factors and context for development can be complex and understanding these from Bronfenbrenner's ecological model allows for effective intervention (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective children's learning, development and wellbeing are situated within the context of family, culture, and community who interact with each other (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Scott, 2009).

Wellbeing is correlated with resilience. It relates to one's ability to cope with and bounce back from challenging situations (Twigg & Pendergest, 2013). Tugade and Fredrickson (2004, p. 1) describe resiliency in the following way:

> there are individuals who seem to bounce back from negative events quite effectively, whereas others are caught in a rut, seemingly unable to get out of their negative streaks. Being able to move on despite negative stressors does not demonstrate luck on the part of those successful individuals but demonstrates a concept known as resilience and this also meant effective coping and adaptation regardless of the stressors they might experience.

The emotional, subjective and psychological aspects of resiliency are described by Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) as, "emotional intelligence" (p. 3) and, "emotional regulation" (p. 4) and can result in individuals feeling positive responses in times where potentially negative emotions can affect mood. Being able to self-manage cognitive skills, behaviours and emotions to participate effectively in an ECEC program is referred to as self-regulation. Positive relationships can provide support to young children and influence self-regulation by providing feedback about emotions and guiding children in positive interactions with others (Bronson, 2000). Understanding these aspects from an educational perspective can

intervene by building resilience and capacity in children and families. Relationships with others and with ourselves are central to teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to social and emotional learning (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro (2013). ECEC services are important places for supporting resilience. The everyday practices of ECEPs can protect and promote resilience, support self-regulation, teach social skills, provide positive learning environments, and social supports (such as the BBB Project and Buddy Program described by my research participants) and build respectful, responsive, and reciprocal relationships with children and their families to support the development of resilience (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). This may mean extending the role of education to further enhance the understanding of resiliency but must begin from the ground up. Families with, "diverse structures and resources, must organise their households and relational networks in varied ways to meet life challenges. Resilience is strengthened by flexible structure, connectedness, and social and economic resources" (Walsh, 2015, p. 14).

An awareness of one's emotions and feelings can take someone from an emotionally reactive state into a place of understanding what they are feeling so they can make choices. Such interventions and interactions are at the heart of education, particularly in ECEC settings. There is a reciprocal relationship between positive meaning and positive emotions. What sits behind this is based on meaning-making and relationship-building which this research espouses. Family participants indicated many feelings, beliefs and perceptions that were negative, not necessarily true or real except to their own subjective experience. Many of the participants also indicated attributes and behaviours of strength, courage and resilience. Walsh (2015, p. 420) points out that, "All individuals and families have the potential to strengthen their resilience; we can maximise that potential by encouraging their best efforts, strengthening their key processes, and drawing on resources".

Families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged experience stressors that can leave them open to risk factors and they (like their children) may benefit from learning and understanding resiliency and how to apply it. This could also come in the form of bringing together groups for families to share their experiences, learnings and strategies with other parents and with ECEPs. Young children's cognitive and/or physiological resilience is still developing and they need to learn to understand their feelings and emotions. They do this intuitively and within relationships with others. It is important to ameliorate reactive responses to life events and this can be done through positive support of behaviours, and fostering resilience and protective factors. Children who display positive developmental

outcomes even under the most adverse of conditions, have been identified to have experienced the ongoing presence of and attachment to a nurturing primary caregiver and this is important for developing resilience (Cowen, Wyman, Work & Parker, 1990). Resilience is linked to attachment to a consistent and empathetic worker.

Helping children develop the capacity to cope with day-to-day stress and challenges, as well as the disposition for perseverance when faced with unfamiliar situations, promotes self-regulation and generates opportunities for ongoing success (DEEWR, 2009; Arthur et al., 2015, p. 347). While stressors may exist at home the ECEC setting should be a place that is safe and protective, with many activities to encourage learning and wellbeing. It is essential that through self-expression and play, an ECEP can inculcate processes to express an increasing sense of self and agency as children, "negotiate the patterns of relationships presented to them" (EYLF, p. 9). For the purposes of this study, specifically in relation to development and wellbeing, a vulnerable child is defined as a child for whom ECEPs have developmental concerns in the areas of Physical Health and Wellbeing, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language and Cognitive skills, Communication and General Knowledge (AEDI, 2012). ECEPs, may also have concerns related to their family circumstances arising from any social, emotional, mental health or physical stressors, parental characteristics and/or parenting issues, or experience of stressful life events that may be impacting on the child.

Intervention can take place through education and acts as a process of social engineering. For children, experiencing diverse contexts can be a protective factor that teaches them the skills to become successful adults and contributing members of community. The data collected describes typical types of barriers and stressors for the family that can impact on the lives of children. Most of the concerns of the families in this study were centred on their feelings and perceptions of how they were seen and supported within the ECEC environment, how they viewed their support by ECEPs, and about inclusion in the decision-making. They needed to feel a sense of belonging, the achievement of the desire to make friendships, and support in fostering relationships with peers and ECEPs. Families' focus on relationships acted as a barrier, when trust was not established, and they felt they were being judged. Whereas families felt enabled by positive relationships that were respectful, inclusive and where they felt understood. They sought out this understanding and connection with the ECEPs and their peers. The children too, viewed the ECEC setting as particularly positive and filled with many engaging activities and relationships with other children, ECEPs and their

own families. The ECEC setting presented a place where children could thrive and grow, despite the possible presence of stressors at home.

Being engaged in a conversation and/or a relationship is a sought after relational ideal as it comes from an honest and open approach in communications that with trust and empathy make interactions more positive and, "often the most enlightening conversations develop from child initiations and interests. Conversations can help build positive relationships between children and adults as well as act to sustain them" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 334). The largest barrier ECEPs experienced was around the need for further professional development, mentoring and training. They felt well prepared for child-focussed work but felt uncertain when dealing with families, especially those with complex needs. They also felt constrained by time factors that limited their ability to communicate. It was thought that empathy, time and trust were key attitudes, values and approaches in relationship-building, a significant enabler in the ECEC setting.

Core Elements of Effective Engagement

Figure 9 is a graphic representation of the core elements of effective engagement between the child, the family and the ECEP who are placed at the centre of my diagram. Radiating around this are increasing circles that respect the sequence of necessary values needed for successful results in the early years which are: Empathy, Time and Trust, Communication and Relationships. Surrounding these, are a large part of what is the focus around the enablers and barriers in ECEC and has been discovered through this research study from reviewing the literature in the field and from the data findings. Finally, I will address the quadrants representing indicators of success: Social Inclusion, Access, Engagement and Participation. All of these combine to create effective collaborative practices that foster children and family relationships with ECEPs. The connecting circles imply the enablers that work between the children, families and ECEPs.

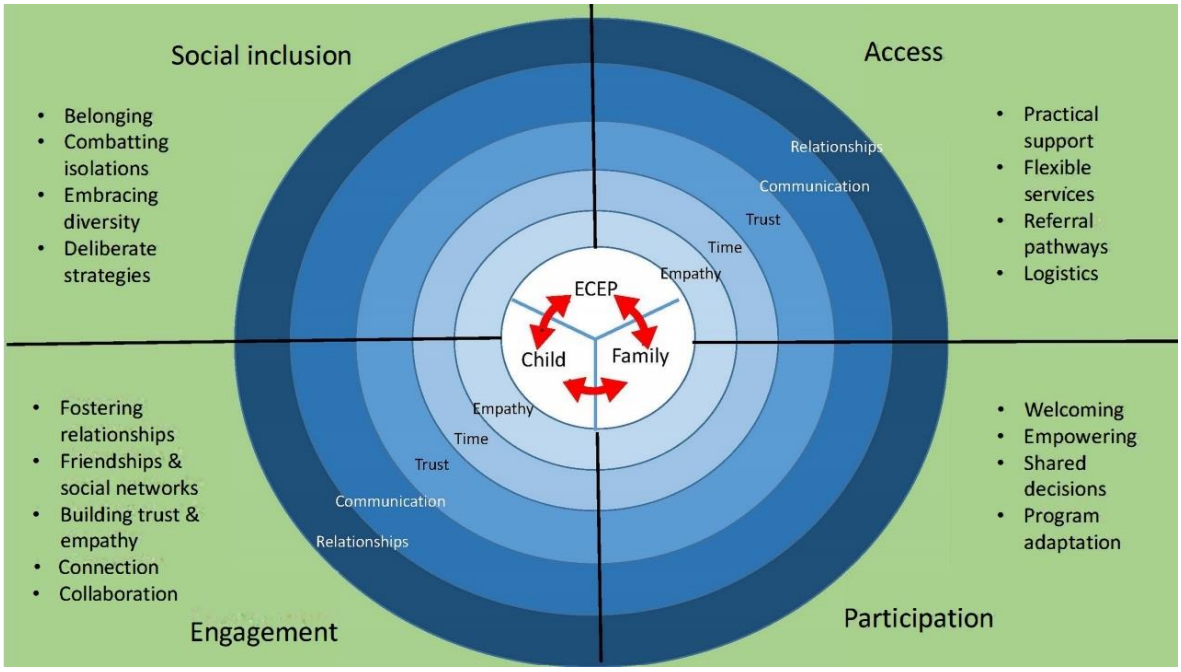


Figure 9 Core elements of effective engagement

The Inner Circle: Child, Family, and ECEP

Working with the child. For the, "everyday" child the focus of early year's experiences should embrace emotional and developmental factors around social skills that foster growth to achieve their potential. To learn empathy and experience trust must occur in the life of the child before these ideas can be taken into their own thinking. The education of the child should be a holistic engagement of body, mind, and spirit (Nicholson, 2000). Through, "creative play and sharing of stories, children develop the capacity for later intellectual, social, and imaginative tasks" (Follari, 2015, p. 266). Amidst the trauma, the stressors, and the barriers that have been discussed in this research, the ECEC setting can be a place where children are free to explore their learning and their identity in a safe and trusting environment. This was evident in their drawings that were filled with places, activities, and equipment to explore in which they depicted positive emotions and offered words such as love, like, and happiness. Whether a place of escape or a place that enriches their current environment, it is important for the ECEP to be part of this process.

This ideology of a child's collaboration in their own learning is in this study represented by the images and statements that capture the voice of the child. Teaching children from a strengths-based perspective and by moving from discipline to guidance, "a guidance approach encourages the development of self-regulation, respect for others, joint

problem solving and ethically and socially just behaviours" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 347). Engaging children in general group discussions about positive social behaviours such as feeling safe, having fun, playing, learning with other peers, and forming relationships with their ECEPs who are trustworthy, positive role models, are all protective factors.

For everyone, relationships can be complex. This is the same for children whether they are experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage or not. Families can have a great impact on the child and it is of dire importance to include families into the early years' equation. It is important to focus on the child in the context of the whole family for it is the thinking, beliefs, values and attitudes of the family that are most influential in a child's life-world. Fostering this will require an overhaul of what we now know and what does work. This re-evaluation can begin by the addition of a Family Engagement Model that is values based and involves ECEPs engaging with the needs of the child and their family. Children develop within their own context and it is necessary to create a safety net around them. Despite sometimes complex backgrounds, families should be steered into a place of trust where they feel safe, can be open to ideas, and feel supported in their parenting. To support a child, we must support their family.

ECEP/child relationships are extremely important and when there are stressors in a family or child's life the ECEPs and the ECEC settings can be a place of escape, a safe and protective space for the child to grow, experience wellbeing and develop resiliency. Follari (2015) notes that at every point of discussion the prosperity of the child is always at the focal point. This research began with understanding the enablers and barriers from the perspective of ECEPs, who are the frontline in their work with children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. As my research progressed through hearing the voice of ECEPs, families and children, the research expanded in depth and understanding. It opened up a vast array of understanding of what the child needed and the positive role played by foundational factors such as resiliency, positive dispositions, and learning life and social skills. The researcher found that there was a gap in research literature concerning the highly significant role of vulnerable families in the life of the child. However the data from the children themselves (the drawings and associated statements) reflected the significance to them of their relationships with members of their families and many children referred to some member of their family (mum, brother, sister, dad).

By understanding the issues of vulnerable children and their families, it is possible to suggest interventions via an ECEC setting.

When ECEPs have a negative view of the chances of a child or family reaching their full potential or have little hope that they can overturn the cycle of disadvantage, these thoughts may turn to actions that are unintentionally exclusionary, negatively affecting the children and families with stressors. Without having positive and high expectations a child may not reach their full potential. Seeing no hope or opportunity for families and children in need can be a prohibitive factor in their development. Families too might sense this and when they are in the company of the ECEPs they might feel marginalised, judged and isolated. Such experiences of disappointment can impact a child and family and impede the child's progress and success. "Early childhood educators who are committed to equity believe in all children's capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities. Children progress well when they, their parents and educators hold high expectations for their achievement in learning (EYLF, 2009, p. 12)".

The ECEPs were less familiar with working alongside children and families who have experienced trauma. As Terr (2003, p. 326) asserts, "For the traumatised, the future is a landscape filled with crags, pits and monsters. For the depressed, the future is a bleak, featureless landscape stretched out to infinity" (Terr, 2003, p. 326). For the traumatised the, "shield of invincibility" is shattered and for children this loss of trust and autonomy appears, "to characterise almost all event-engendered disorders of childhood" (Terr, 1995, p. 308). Seminal writers Lifton and Olson (1976, p. 2) describe, "the shattering in the survivor of the illusion of invulnerability we carry with us in both ordinary and dangerous situations, and a related sense of having been rendered precariously vulnerable to the next threat". The traumatised child may have feelings of, "futureless-ness" which is, "quite different to that of the depressed youngster" (Terr, 2003, p. 326).

Working with the family. In collecting data from family participants it became evident that a family's experience affected the child's even in terms of accessing a service in the first place. Access may be hindered not just by monetary and transport concerns but also by distrustful attitudes to these services. Families are the largest influence in a child's life. In working with children it is essential that families are included. Families were strongly influenced by their feelings and perceptions, whether positive or negative; they need to experience ECEC settings that are culturally appropriate, embrace diversity, and accepting so

that families feel that they belong and are understood. When this occurred their feelings of isolation whether physical or social were reduced. This study recommends a model that encapsulates the core elements of effective engagement in ECEC so that the child, their family, and the ECEPs working with them feel and experience positive results.

Through the data analysis from both the ECEP perspective and the family viewpoint one of the most familiar enablers and barriers was relationships. Building positive and strong relationships with children and families were of utmost importance. A major key to the success of this work is based on the values that ECEPs convey in their work, which must demonstrate "principles such as empathy, respect, genuineness, optimism and partnership" (Whittaker et al., 1990; Davis, Day & Bidmead, 2002; Scott, 2009; Arney & Scott, 2013).

Parents desired family cohesion and a network of other parents with children, who would empathise because they are in similar situations, fostering a sense of belonging and connection with the ECEP and the service. Families could be placed into peer groups that might engender feelings of understanding, belonging and connection. They often worried about what others might think and this could hold them back from participating further in their child's education. Recognition as individuals, who were partners in decision-making was essential. Previous negative experiences with services could make families distrustful of ECEC services and resistant to accessing services unless in crisis, for fear of retribution or stigmatisation.

The ECEPs also noted that some families found it difficult to communicate or relate to educators/professionals. ECEPs beliefs and attitudes were based on compassion but at times they felt uncertain how best to support families and lacked the necessary communication skills to do so. For example, some ECEPs indicated that they often did not know how to approach issues such as inclusion/exclusion or marginalisation, diversity, cultural differences, and/or disability. Professional development and training was one of the greatest enablers from the ECEPs perspective who sought to have access to more opportunities to support their learning.

Working with the ECEP. ECEPs are seen to be expert and have practice wisdom from their previous education and training, and from many years of experience working with children and their families. ECEPs strongly identified a need for different types of knowledge, more than their current training had allowed, to give them skills and strategies to enable them to work more successfully with the complex needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children,

parents and families and for mentoring within the workplace. ECEPs felt that their training had left them unprepared for engaging with adults in families and they were uncertain how to establish genuine, collaborative partnerships and effective ways of communicating and supporting families. ECEPs may need to revisit their foundational learning via PD that addresses changing societal issues and diverse values, as well as dynamic relationships with children and families, who are at the centre of practice. Underpinning this should be "a social justice agenda to, focus the locus of change agency both internally, through increased self-knowledge, and externally, through working relationally with individuals, organisations and within systems to bring about positive and ethical change" (Nicholson & Kroll, 2015, p. 17). The contemporary world has changed in family structure and economy, and roles of communities require new understanding. Now, "teachers need to be skilled in communication as well as child development" (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2011, p. 4) and be aware of, "silent rules of discourse" (p. 16). As well as ongoing training needs, the role of leadership and mentoring in the ECEC setting needs to be embedded in the service. Leaders can play, "a role in shaping a vision" (Carter, 2000, p. 99) and require, "reflective supervision" (Nicholson & Kroll, 2015, p. 20). At the heart of relationships is a value for creating a, "safe and welcoming space" (Heffron & Murch, 2010) that tends, "to the physical, social and emotional development of the program" (Carter, 2000, p. 99) and ensures that, "the physical space is ideal" (Carter, 2000, p. 100). When ECEPs are attuned, aware and present in the moment, they become much more able to, "listen and observe children's perspectives and less likely to respond in reactive, judgemental ways" (Curtis & Carter, 2013). ECEPs are capable of working and leading together as a "social practice, collaborating effectively in relationships and interactions with others" (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Collaborative networks were seen to be effective and desired by ECEPs within their service delivery, cross-sector approaches and also with families. Ideally there should be opportunities for learning, reflection and support for ECEPs. In this a supportive trusting relationship with a supervisor or mentor is pivotal. Ideally learning for all involved requires empathy, trust, time and a protected space where people feel safe that they will be listened to, understood, supported and not judged or have their feelings betrayed. Supportive and collaborative networks can come in many forms and be cross-sectorial. ECEPs valued opportunities to discuss and communicate with other colleagues within and beyond their immediate sectors. In the current social climate leadership in early childhood requires adopting an international perspective as increasing globalisation, "necessitates stronger skills

in inter organisational, cross-cultural communication, the effective use of information technology, and broad professional networking" (Oberheumer, 2000). This demands the development of, "a tool box of effective strategies" (Nicholas & Kroll, 2015, pp. 18–19). ECEPs saw part of their job as being role models so that ECEPs supporting one another can grow in confidence and understanding that arises from sharing ideas, reflecting on teaching techniques and attitudes, demonstrating an openness toward growth in an environment in which there is freedom to explore ideas, thoughts and practices.

The Concentric Rings

The three central rings (Empathy, Time and Trust) are the key elements that must surround children, families and ECEPs. These are the key qualities that underpin the values that guide best practice and prompt greater communication and relationship building.

Empathy. Empathy is an essential part of human relationships and is about connection with and understanding of others (Allison et al., 2011; Peck, 2015). For practitioners, empathy can be enacted via a holistic approach to teaching and learning that recognises the connectedness of mind, body and spirit (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). Having an empathetic understanding of another person or individual means seeing their perspective through their eyes and deliberately acknowledging their reality. It requires a communicator to set aside their own assumptions and judgements to understand and support others as they really are. Building genuine empathy in the ECEPs is at the heart of humanitarian practice. There should be no imposition of beliefs or values on another but this does not mean that an ECEP does not guide a child and/or family but rather comes from a non-judgemental perspective. Commitment and open, supportive and sensitive attitudes assist in building relationships but often perceptions, whether true or not, can impact empathetic relationships. Empathy is a trait and skill necessary for ECEPs working with children and for partnering with families (Peck, Maude & Brotherson, 2015). According to Dunst and Trivette (1996), family-centred practices have both *relational* and *participatory* components. The relational component includes practices typically associated with active listening, compassion, empathy, respect and being non-judgemental.

In this study all of the families were sensitive to feelings of being judged. It can take families a long time to feel an empathetic connection with their ECEPs and with other peers

and families. To create an empathetic connection ECEPs need to be in a place of strength rather than in a place of power and this is the first step in making the connections that families so deeply desire. Empathetic relationships are not built hastily.

Time. Many participants raised time as a barrier to best practice. As mentioned before one participant succinctly encapsulated that the problem was, "not having time to network, connect and partner with other services to ensure the service system provides genuine tailored, flexible approaches to vulnerable families". The cost of not providing timely supports to children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage is significant, given that as problems get worse, they become more difficult and expensive to remedy (Hertzman, 2002). Having time to engage and reflect was essential for all participants in this study. The ECEPs reported feeling time poor, particularly when working with vulnerable and disadvantaged families and having little time to undertake individual planning, meet with children and their families, build relationships with children, talk with their colleagues and generate effective strategies for engagement. It was noted that staff are given appropriate time for planning in their roles, as legislated, however it didn't appear to be enough time to support their work with vulnerable children and families. As Boag-Munroe and Evagelou (2012, p. 209) succinctly state, "Complex issues need complex solutions, which in turn need time to implement". A lack of time is a serious barrier that precluded thinking outside the box. Without time and space, it is impossible for anyone involved to reflect and synergise. The ECEPs identified a number of ways to address this issue, for example, using families more thoughtfully in innovative ways in programs allows families to simultaneously contribute, participate, be engaged, feel included and validated, and hopefully develop a sense of belonging and connection.

ECEPs would appreciate having time that was not completely allocated to tasks and everyday duties as educators, case workers, counsellors, and allied health professionals. The ECEPs made a number of suggestions about how time could be garnered. For example, program assistance, more teacher aides, smaller staff-child ratios and volunteers could alleviate some of the time pressures. If families were recruited to some of these roles, it would be an additional opportunity for participation, engagement and validation. This would turn a barrier into a potential enabler that engages participants in a collaborative process. Pianta et al., (1999) found that, "when using a participatory approach …the process itself was successful… in reaching qualitative authentic responses and solutions from the firsthand knowledge of those working with vulnerable children, encouraging open dialogue among

diverse stakeholders" (p. 119). Participants in this study described the Knox City Council's Buddy Program (2010) as a successful collaborative process that engages families as volunteers in a range of participatory roles. Whether as teacher's assistant or as peer group volunteers for families, volunteers felt more engaged. The ECEPs described different ways for families and parents to volunteer in or outside the service that might be a very practical and positive process. For example, while the teacher educates the volunteer can help set up individual and group experiences for the children as described on the program plan. Alternatively, a volunteer can read books aloud while the teacher is preparing her individual plans. Teachers of children with specific difficulties or disabilities might appreciate the presence of parents, families or grandparents who might be able to help the child settle into a new environment and make this transition or adjustment easier and more positive. Also, families that might have hands-on knowledge of barriers in the system, or those who have come from backgrounds where risk factors existed have insight and wisdom of their own that cannot be underestimated and both the volunteer and the child and their family prosper.

Support groups for families can allow them to spend time with their peers when otherwise they might feel out of place. Having peer support is successful in developing a sense of belonging for the parent in the community. Sometimes people need an excuse to come together. Forming peer groups framed around a reference point that is inviting and non-threatening can be an enabler to engagement. In this having community leaders who have some experience or knowledge is invaluable. This knowledge is often based on personal experience, and/or their own practical and emotional understandings of being a parent or grandparent. Using volunteers in this way can create a feeling of time for both ECEPs, children and their families. Early childhood professionals and childhood services are well placed to enable and enact change when there is adequate provision of time, resources and facilities (Roberts, 2015).

Trust. ECEC services need to develop relationships of trust with families and with each other. Relationship building is not only time-intensive but also requires adequate and sustained funding to ensure continuity of staffing and provision of service (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012). Moore (2010) identified relational and interpersonal barriers that align with my research findings about perceptions, beliefs, values, insensitivities to culture, judgemental and unsupportive attitudes, and families' feelings of mistrust and disempowerment. To overcome these hurdles, it is essential that staff have the necessary capacity for engaging parents (Axford et al., 2012). Building trust between staff and families can act as a provider of

support and guidance that refrains from overriding the family's own beliefs and motivations of what they want for their child within the ECEC setting. Parents who experience or participate in neglect need to find common ground with workers so that trust can develop. With trust parents become more open and more responsive to ECEPs so are more likely to make life changes. When a connection is established and parents understand that the ECEP is trying to improve their circumstances then they are more likely to respond to suggestions.

The role of the ECEC setting is to provide a safe, secure, welcoming and nurturing environment for children and their families. Trust is built in environments and in relationships. Participating in relationships that have trust at their centre, "encourages parents to engage and participate alongside workers and allows cooperation to take place" (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Fernandez & Healey, 2007; Reimer, 2010; Zeira, 2007). The responses from family participants frequently identified the importance of having a key worker—a consistent person that they would work with, or seek help from, one specific ECEP right through to assist with all aspects of their needs. This was seen as a significant enabler. Key workers were seen as diligent and could be easily accessed and families, on most occasions, expressed that they felt close to the person. It helped that everything was accessed through one person; logistically this was useful. Having access to information or available funding was seen as an important enabler. As the key worker gets to know a family and child's needs well, from familiarity through spending time with them, they could refer them to other services, such as when they might need assistance to access a program like community transport or a community health service.

An enabler for families was having a key worker in a one-to-one adult relationship that is trustworthy and supportive of the wellbeing of the child and acts as a protective factor. Children need, "at least one consistent caring adult to whom they can attach, [someone to support] developing their sense of self and agency within a protected relationship and environment" (Masten, Morrison, Pelligrini & Tellegen, 1990). Similarly, in teaching it is essential that there are, "thoughtful, sensitive interactions between educators and children [that] can support, challenge and extend children's learning" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 28). Maintaining reliable, stable and consistent relationships is essential in developing trust. An ECEP explained that:

> if children and their families are trusting someone they're more likely to open up about what they really need, or what's going on, [and are] more likely to move along the

> pathway of accessing more services, or agreeing to have a look, have a go at some things ... I think that's the key enabler.

ECEC settings should be:

> places of safety and trust that are … spontaneous, imaginative, self and co-created worlds that emerge in play [and] serve to nourish the body, mind and spirit [to provide] opportunities to create social bonds in a way that cannot be achieved as meaningfully through other adult-controlled activities. (Follari, 2015, p. 15)

ECEPs need to be informal in their approach particularly when conveying trust (de Boer & Coady, 2003; Reimer, 2010). This requires honesty in their role and allows ECEPs to have a closer relationship, be genuine and have integrity through being personal and human. Empathy, time and trust are at the core of all effective relationships and generate a shared space for engagement and communication.

Communication. Communication should be values-based, driven by understandings of social justice. Supportive, proactive and positive communication is essential. Families often said they perceived some negative attitudes from ECEPs, which made them feel judged and excluded. Communication that is open and sincere is more effective. At the heart of communication must exist empathy and the skill to foster trust with children and families so that they feel validated, supported and nurtured. This is pivotal for all relationships. This study comes from a values-based perspective and is underpinned by social inclusion, acceptance of diversity, humanitarian values and empowerment. Language and communication barriers can be subtle. Language can define, judge and marginalise individuals or groups. If language is not egalitarian or empowering, it can cause barriers to progress for children and families. When there is no longer a power imbalance families are viewed as critical in the decision-making for their child's needs. Over time this creates longer lasting, more satisfying relationships that engage families and are better for everyone and facilitate an effective and rewarding ECEC experience. Communication can be used to enhance relationships and develop trust with families. Communication skills can be learnt and should be underpinned by empathy, kindness, and care. The acquisition of communication skills by ECEPs and families (and their children) enables better relationships that combat isolation and overcome feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. Non-caring, judgemental and expert approaches where ECEPs take an authoritarian approach that excludes families

from decision-making were seen as barriers. Developing partnerships with families that are focused on maintaining engagement is a long-term enterprise and requires positive communication, empathy, time and trust. It begins with the first day the child and family enter the doors of the ECEC service and continues with each time they come into contact with the ECEP and each meeting they have with other families and their peers. Every time a contact is made it can be an opportunity for connection, understanding, belonging, and relationship building, combatting feelings of isolation.

Relationships. Relationships are crucial (Moore et al., 2012; Moore, 2015) and should be value-based and employ a strengths-based culture that respects the dignity, rights, differences and similarities of individuals. Such engagement should reflect a belief in people and their potential, and enact a commitment to openness, honesty, inclusion and shared decision-making (McCashen, 2005). In this research effective partnerships were seen to be non-judgemental and non-threatening, employing non-expert approaches and demonstrating reliability, commitment, trustworthiness, confidentiality, and empathy. An enabler in working with vulnerable and disadvantaged families, one participant noted, "it sounds funny but being a real person and not coming in as an expert is really, really important and reflective listening is a very, very powerful tool and builds up trust with the families". Understanding families from where they are at is vital. Parents should be involved in the decision-making participating in their child's education, wellbeing and care. ECEPs thought that perceptions and feelings about relationships repeatedly arose as a key issue in achieving early childhood success. In effective relationships it is important for families and children to have a voice. When these groups become vulnerable and disadvantaged they can be viewed in negative, judgemental ways. Ideally such attitudes do not exist within ECEC settings. Children and their families need to have healthy expectations and these should be encouraged by ECEPs.

Relationships and attitudes can impact hugely on the way people collaborate and work together. Strong trusting relationships between ECEPs and families rely on all feeling comfortable and safe, within a welcoming, secure learning environment. Families need to know that their child and indeed their family will be accepted and cared for, in the same way as other children and families. This concern can be compounded if the child has special needs or if the family is experiencing stressors. Barriers to developing relationships between ECEPs and families can be restricted by cultural, economic, educational, and power differentials between parents and ECEPs; they can inhibit collaboration (Arndt & McGuire-Swartz, 2008). Contributing to these barriers can be the ECEPs lack of skills to support their values-based

relationships. Some ECEPs may be influenced by traditions of the past, particularly if they have been in the field for a number of years; their previous education and training can be limited by today's standards. Issues such as changing family structures, acceptance of diversity, and the increased presence of refugees, may cause feelings of unpreparedness to respond effectively. There are also many ECEPs, who have worked in the field for decades and have accumulated practice wisdom, which enhances leadership and mentoring capabilities.

When work is done collaboratively and shared with other ECEPs across sectors and with families it brings feelings of validation and ownership. Through cross-sector collaborative relationships experts in different fields can come together with the child as the focal point. In this study ECEPs desired authentic collaboration and partnerships that were accepted as having positive effects on morale. Understood as a Community of Practice teachers came together to share resources, bestow affirmation and problem solve (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). Recognised as a third space, collaborative practices allowed those involved to interact in ways that are characterised as a community rather than a hierarchy. This tended to, "complement mentoring and induction" … [and],"supported professional development" (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011, p. 73).

Ideas relating to collaboration and partnership building, as a focus of service structure and policy, planning and implementation on an everyday level is a relatively new approach. Simply implementing practices that consider the difficulties collaboration and attending meetings present for single parent families with one or more children to support is paramount. These types of strategies aim to reduce barriers that can occur around power relationships. There is an intention to negotiate rather than employing a more authoritarian approach to management and leadership. It has often been noted that those participating in collaborative approaches tend to feel a sense of ownership in the project and are more willing to participate when given an opportunity to be part of the decision-making process. Cross-sectorial support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families works better in coordinating timely responses to their needs. ECEPs work with parallel processes creating safe and protected spaces to explore their emotions in terms of self-respect, self-compassion and self-empathy; this in turn allows them to reflect on those feelings of respect compassion and empathy, interacting with children and families, keeping these qualities in mind (Stroud, 2010; Nicholson & Kroll, 2015).

Relationships, whether positive or negative, shape us as we are inherently social beings (Lieberman, 2013). Within our psyche there is a continual interplay or what could be understood as a negotiation between our inner world and the contexts in which we exist. It is often difficult to move from the single minded reality and subjective experience to encompass and understand multiple realities (Solomon, 2013). Allowing us to be both individual and part of groups, this flexibility of understanding makes connections with others and contributes to these group realities whereby relationships live in what Bhabha (1994) calls, "the third space". By living in this third space we are continually evolving.

Collaboration through a cross-sector approach was identified as an enabler by ECEPs who were able to come together to support children and their families. Data revealed that complexities do occur in information sharing, particularly around privacy and confidentially issues, which can be a barrier to effective practice. Without collaboration and cross-sector sharing of knowledge, the child cannot be, cared for holistically. Effective collaboration relies on the facilitation of moral dialogue (Shields, 2004), which is the basis for human relationships, organisational life, and for leading and learning (Nicholson & Kroll, 2015). Family engagement based on collaborative relationships requires communication skills, a humanitarian and values-based approach, building of trust, empathy and resiliency over time. All these issues must be recognised to support dialogue and to form a common ground for engagement between stakeholder groups. Effective partnerships between ECEPs and families were seen by many of the ECEPs to be non-judgemental, reliable, committed, trustworthy, confidential and empathic but they expressed that additionally, time is needed to develop such strong relationships.

The Quadrants

The quadrants represent the four key indicators of success and the best practice areas within the ECEC sector that can act as enablers to give vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families a successful early start.

Social inclusion. Every child and family regardless of their circumstances and needs has the right to participate fully in life and to be afforded the same opportunities, choices and experiences as others in society. They need to feel accepted, included and feel a genuine sense of belonging. Children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, including those with disabilities often need extra support to fully participate in their ECEC settings. Inclusion is

about creating environments where children and their families can develop meaningful relationships, be valued for their contributions and perspectives and have opportunities to participate and be actively engaged in all of the activities and experiences provided in ECEC settings (Moore, 2012a).

Social inclusion is best achieved through the formation and maintenance of effective relationships between those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability and the ECEPs who work together with families to create a sense of community in the ECEC setting. Through a focus on social skills, children and their families can develop in socially mixed groups that support and embrace diversity. This can be more effective than only being part of disadvantaged groups. Within the ECEC setting it is necessary to have deliberate strategies that support diversity. For families as much as for children, feeling a sense of belonging is of utmost importance and sometimes even more so when they are experiencing isolation both in their physical surroundings but also in their lack of connection with and understanding of others. This may be due to the disadvantages they are experiencing which compounds their isolation and makes it difficult to find a place of connection with others, which is necessary for survival. All people need to be involved with and have relationships with a variety of people (contexts). Often shared understanding can be intentionally evoked and fostered within ECEC settings. The common bond between all children and their families and ECEPs is the wellbeing of the child or children. Key elements identified in fostering social inclusion are: Belonging, Combating Isolation, Embracing Diversity and Deliberate Strategies.

Belonging. Before families can fully engage in the ECEC service and develop relationships with ECEPs, they need to feel welcome from the first moment they present in an ECEC setting. Families need to feel accepted and given the sense that they do belong, and are not excluded and this often comes from the interactions during initial contacts. A continuation of these positive interactions can lead to connection and understanding. Families continually spoke about the need to feel a sense of belonging and of being understood, a sense of mutually beneficial friendships with their peers, which are other families, particularly those in similar situations; they wish to achieve genuine connections. It seems the ECEC setting could potentially be a place where such indicative positive relationships are fostered, working as enablers. These involve value-based approaches that ECEPs can employ to enhance communication coming from a place of empathy and trust. Such engagement and relationship building takes time so that a sincere and honest approach can impact the lives of all

stakeholders, including the ECEPs who also benefit from participating in better relationships with families through a collaborative and partnership-based approach.

Combating isolation. Participants reported experiencing social isolation and a sense that their problems are unique. Through seeing how others live and experience life, children and families can learn that there are other ways of doing things. Diversity is good for all as it can broaden thinking and the realisation that there are also other perspectives that may be valid. Those not experiencing difficulties to the same degree can act as a support network for others. Such networks may be quite small, such as talking to a neighbour, or another parent, or they may be larger, incorporating more community members. This can indirectly teach people the value of diversity, of other cultures, of acceptance, compassion and empathy. Getting to know individuals moves understanding from impersonal marginalising labels to personal awareness and acceptance. Until people find connections with others, they can fall victim to judgmental attitudes regardless of their context. Suspending or removing judgment and breaking down stereotypes is hugely important in the quest for acceptance, inclusion and belonging.

Embracing diversity.

> Children's identity and their family and cultural histories shape their learning and development. Children feel welcome and learn well when professionals respect and acknowledge their unique identity. Equitable opportunities for children promote their learning and development outcomes. All children have the capacity to succeed, regardless of their circumstances and abilities. Values and attitudes, understandings of community and individual, and ways of communicating and behaving, all impact on children's sense of belonging and acceptance. When children experience acknowledgement of and respect for diversity, their sense of identity becomes stronger. (VELDF, 2016, p. 12)

It is important for all ECEPs to accept each child and their family unconditionally as individuals with unique needs. This requires time and familiarity so that trust can be built which works best when embedded in positive values and couched in ideals that are empowering, inclusive, supportive of diversity and based on humanitarian beliefs. While families may be considered vulnerable and disadvantaged or at risk, like all families they have their own context/culture and way of being, with their own rules and customs. When ECEPs raise their awareness of new contexts from their diverse ECEC community they gain an

appreciation of better ways of embracing and engaging families. It is vital that they use this knowledge to foster open and flexible, effective lines of communication. There can be no respectful, authentic engagement without the acceptance of diversity. Programs that embrace diversity in a positive and proactive way allow children to be in and around a variety of cultures. This also provides parents opportunities to develop connections with people from their own and other cultures, which can act as a protective factor.

Deliberate strategies. Effective engagement by ECEPs encompasses both the practical and the philosophical. A social justice approach that supports best practice, equity, and human rights, is values-driven and uses pragmatic approaches. With support and time to network ECEPs can share and reflect on effective strategies. Within ECEC settings, ECEPs, curriculum, and value-based teaching is the best way to build foundations for inclusion and belonging for families. All people can grow through adopting a humanitarian perspective and during the influential early years, children can learn tolerance, and respect for others. It is essential that ECEPs intentionally teach about the diversity of life, successful relationships, and the importance of a positive self-view. Effective ECEC services should promote child development and learning, and build family and community relationships. These can be fostered by consistent observation, documentation, and assessment that supports young children and their families. ECEPs should use developmentally appropriate practices, and build meaningful curriculum based on relevant content knowledge (Follari, 2015).

Deliberate strategies toward social inclusion, embracing diversity, and a value-based approach to empowerment and humanitarian values are essential. ECEP practices should be transparent and accountable and this might require further education. Many families, even those not at risk, struggle in their child's early years and lack the confidence or know how to best nurture, care and support their child. This is magnified when there are additional difficulties such as having a child with a disability or the family experiencing stressors. Appropriate nurturing in early years programs by ECEPs helps families understand larger issues and also gives them confidence to approach such challenges. ECEPs take on numerous roles that are partnership-based, involve communication, use a variety of groupings with families and students, are flexible, value contribution, use technology to support the educational process, are welcoming, and have agendas and advocacy in place (Rock, 2000). Ongoing training would be beneficial to build new knowledge with the intent to change conscious and unconscious biases, and recognised and unrecognised discriminatory attitudes and assumptions. Those in leadership roles in ECEC settings may have feelings of uncertainty

because although there is equity and diversity legislation, implementing it in practice for the day to day is not always straightforward. However those leaders do need to model best practice, setting policy direction and expectations to ensure their specific ECEC setting embraces diversity and social inclusion. Ongoing training would be one avenue to fill gaps in knowledge or change those few ECEPs with culturally inappropriate attitudes and beliefs. Specifically, when tensions such as this discord exist, conflicts are not resolved, closure cannot take place, which can make training and professional development goals difficult to achieve (Helsing, 2007).

Access. Access is one of the most elusive and yet obvious solutions identified in research. There is a recognition that a large number of young children are not accessing ECEC settings. Without access the opportunities available for children and families in ECECs is lost. For example, access may be hampered by transport and monetary issues. Access is discussed under the sub-headings: Practical Support, Flexible Services, Referral Pathways and Logistics.

Practical support. Vulnerable families can have many barriers to engagement including limited finances, a lack of stable housing, a car or other forms of private transport. They can lack social and/or family support and can find it very difficult to balance competing needs and priorities. Adult and family survival needs might take precedence over attending an ECEC setting. Families experiencing difficulties are more likely to engage with services that acknowledge and understand their basic needs, and offer practical support (Moore, 2010). ECEP participants asserted that practical support was crucial to help children and their families who may be experiencing adversity. Assistance and practical know how regarding such things as monetary concessions on services, transport guidance on community transport options, fee waivers, completing funding applications and, providing facilitated links to other specific programs are all important to vulnerable families. Specifically accessing early childhood programs can be very difficult for parents in regards to transport, money, large families with multiple children, and a lack of knowledge about the value of early childhood education. Many family participants said that they often lacked the ability to pay rent and utilities, provide food for their children to eat during the day at the ECEC setting or purchase clothes, shoes, a bag and other related resources. The ECEC setting can play an important role and often addresses specific problems by providing healthy food, well-fitting shoes and climate appropriate clothing. One parent explained:

> I worry for my children and I am stressed about money and getting the things my kids need. The staff are understanding and helpful and care about me too as well as my two kids. They give practical help and support for me and for them. They provided clothes and bags when we started here and sometimes they provide food for the kids and they never make me feel bad. I bring in letters and they help me read them so I know what I need to do and what the letters and paperwork are about.

There are many challenges for parenting in the context of multiple disadvantages. ECEPs need to be skilled and encouraged to acknowledge parents' capacity and efforts to raise their children and be able to recognise the inequities relating to vulnerable children and families. To effectively address the inequalities ECEC settings should respond to barriers and enablers which lead to better educational outcomes. To improve early childhood educational outcomes for children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, a change in attitude is required so that unequal outcomes for families are seen as social injustices, rather than deficits.

Flexible services.Overall, flexible and relationship-based collaboration, integration, facilitated and coordinated pathway programs that include outreach were seen to enable the early childhood experience. Empowerment and better allocation of resources, flexible and localised services, and increased collaboration between stakeholders can act as enablers, whereas comorbid factors, family issues and lack of resources can act as barriers to this process (Roberts, 2010). Best practice models need to be universal, tiered, integrated, multi-leveled, ecological, place-based, relational, partnership-based, and with a governing structure (Moore, 2012a). The Victorian Government identifies best practice models such as the key worker model, where one person acts as the main point of contact for families, and family-centred practice, where meaningful outcomes for children and families can be achieved by focusing on the strengths and needs of the family. The flexible transdisciplinary team model is recognised as meeting the needs of families who have children with complex needs and diverse professionals involved (DEECD, 2008a). A, "care team approach can share responsibility and effectively respond to a child's needs" (DHS, 2011, p. 2). At the service level there was a lot of discussion around strength-based, family-centred practice and outreach programs and their effectiveness. ECEPs described their programs as offering flexible outreach services to families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage that appear to work well for their children and their families, especially home and community visits where vulnerable families feel comfortable. Outcomes are affected by the way services are delivered

(Davis & Day, 2010) and affected by consequences of service delivery (Dunst & Trivette, 2009a). Consultation with families, both informal and formal, about what is important for them is essential. Families who are actively engaged in the service feel more confident and comfortable in approaching ECEPs to talk about their needs.

Referral pathways. It is important to raise the awareness of families about the local services and supports available. ECEPs should be well informed about access to services and referral pathways so that families are in a position to receive and make the most of what support is out there. ECEPs should be knowledgeable about the needs of vulnerable children and their families so they can guide and support children as they enter the ECEC sector. ECEPs should be aware of what other services offer and be able to facilitate connecting to other providers. A specific example illustrates this point. If a child presents with a disability they might require diagnosis and referral to medical practitioners and early childhood intervention. The ECEPs are, for a child who might be in need, the first point of intervention and the first step in a referral pathway. Without knowledge of such pathways some families might not receive the assistance they need, for example, if they are experiencing financial difficulties they might not know whether they are eligible for concessions. When an ECEP knows the system it can be beneficial for the child and their family and give them more opportunities for support and learning. ECEPs must also have access to this information to perform their role effectively. Doing this takes time which should be available so that families are comfortable with what is happening and do not feel pressured. If ECEPs lack the knowledge and confidence to work with children and their families who present with difficulties/challenges, children and families will be less likely to prosper in the early years.

Logistics. Many people take the basic logistics and running of everyday life as a given. Families experiencing vulnerabilities and adversities may find daily activities complex, challenging and difficult. A common example was the challenge of getting to services and facilities at a specified time via public transport sometimes with multiple children. It appeared that families felt that they needed to prioritise basic necessities and demands. For example, if an adult needed to attend court they would use the car (if there was one), which made getting children to ECEC settings very difficult. Families would sometimes abandon attending ECECs because it was just too hard to do so. This was recounted as a common challenge when adults had drug and alcohol related issues. Other families spoke of problems faced acquiring basic necessities such as food. Access to concessions and fee waivers could be facilitated by ECEPs, which could address some of the barriers faced by families. If families

are able to attend ECEC settings other support can be provided. Families can develop a sense of belonging and dignity by being able to contribute to ECECs as volunteers. For this to occur, families need to be able to get to the ECECs.

Participation. "Over time and with opportunity and support, the ways in which children connect and participate with others increase. Participating in their communities strengthens children's sense of identity and wellbeing" (VEYLDF, 2009, p. 20). Participation was seen to be enabled by the delivery of better services located in a place where families felt safe and empowered, non-judged by the community, and supported by quality frameworks (Roberts, 2010). From inclusive and positive community values through to encouragement and support at the local ECEC level getting parents to participate in their child's future requires encouragement from community and support at the local level. Participation is fostered by a: Welcoming and Empowering Environment, Shared Decision-making, and Program Adaptation.

Welcoming and empowering environment. Family-centred practice and family engagement are key and combine to form a circle of relationships between all stakeholders. One cannot exist without the other. To foster family engagement, ECEC settings should be welcoming spaces. An ECEP, greeting children and families with a smile, actively listening to them is powerful. There should be a friendly on arrival from, ECEPs with an open and supportive manner. Ideally ECEPs should have already met families before the child first attends the ECECs. This can be facilitated by introductions to other families, positive and informative newsletters, possibilities of outreach support and volunteering opportunities. Engagement begins with an inclusive approach so that families can feel that they are welcome and not judged. An empathetic and trusting environment can allay some of the uneasiness of a new location and new environment. Other supportive processes might include breakfasts at the ECECs that might be appreciated by socio-economically disadvantaged families or those who are time poor. To get families to participate in their child's education and care they need to be encouraged in a variety of ways, both in the home environment and at the ECEC setting. Assisting their children in reading, completing homework, painting and drawing are ways for them to contribute. To do all this ECEPs need time to establish trust and demonstrate warmth and empathetic understanding leading to feelings of connection. When this occurs many of the key enablers that have been mentioned would be established. Families need to feel empowered and when they feel they have a voice they are more likely to want to participate in services and be involved in their child's early development, care and nurture. For families to

desire and embrace participation they should be part of the decision-making process in their child's education and care.

Shared decision-making. Long-term relationships and familiarity are ideal for encouraging families to engage in their child's ECEC. Within an ideal equal partnership, decision-making is shared and values enacted. If this occurs families can feel involved during their child's development. The power imbalance that can at times exist between parents and teachers can result in parents seeing ECEPs as experts who are in control of decisions (Risko & Walker-Dalkouse, 2009; Weissbourd, 2009). ECEPs may also view themselves as experts and be unwilling to share educational decision-making with parents (Weissbourd, 2009). This tension was discussed with ECEPs and families in this research. Attitudinal change may be needed on both sides. ECEPs may require support and professional development to relinquish some elements of power (Dettmer et al., 1999; Flanigan, 2007; Matthews & Menna, 2003). For families to feel respected in relationships they must have confidence in themselves and have a strong sense of personal identity, which is formed via the social environment, behaviour and how power is negotiated in relationships (Sommers, 2011). Without a sense of equal partnership parents may choose to participate less in making educational decisions for their child.

Program adaptation. An adaptable program is flexible and can be modified to best support the needs of children and families. Programs need to be re-evaluated regularly, reassessed, developed and extended in light of changing contemporary understanding of skills and knowledge required in today's society. Sometimes this can involve a complete reworking of existing programs, at other times this may require a deliberate and intentional focus on specific skills needed by a particular child. ECEPs need to be open to the possibility of change and aware to the different and changing needs of children and their families. To do this ECEPs should have a strong understanding of child development, education, health and factors that enhance child wellbeing. They also need to be aware of services and supports available. ECEPs may also be challenged by children with additional needs and families with histories of trauma. Key theories relevant to working with children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage identify trauma and attachment theory as fundamental. Consistent, ongoing, responsive caregiving is needed to support children and families who have experienced trauma and disrupted attachment (Golding, 2006). An understanding of Trauma Informed Practice (which includes neuroscience of child development, trauma and

attachment) is essential for ECEPs in their work with children where there has been experiences of abuse and neglect, trauma and violence (Sims, 2006).

Trauma experienced in childhood is increasingly being recognised as one of the primary social determinants of health and wellbeing. Experiences such as traumatic stress, abuse and neglect, alter a developing child's brain in ways that result in enduring emotional, behavioural, cognitive, social and physical problems (Perry, 2006). Violence and abuse experienced by young children can have severe, pernicious, pervasive and lifelong effects on their mental and physical health (for example alcohol and other substance abuse), relationships, expectations of self and others, ability to regulate emotions, educational and vocational outcomes, contact with the criminal justice system, lower socio-economic status and world view (Elliott et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, 2005). Trauma-informed practice has been described as a paradigm shift in service provision (Elliott et al., 2005, p. 462). Certainly, for many practitioners, it represents a new way of responding to problem behaviour. Trauma-informed practitioners must be aware of their own cultural worldviews and histories and how this may influence engagement with young people (Elliott et al., 2005). Wilkinson (2016, p. 180) points out that, "due to the plasticity of the human brain, we can be taught to unlearn negative emotions and develop positive ones". Educational institutions can play an important role by modelling and teaching positive emotions to foster the healing process for traumatised families (Wilkinson, 2016). Children who have experienced trauma are more likely to benefit from ECEC environments that pay attention to their mood, focus on adjusting sensory stimulation to help them stay calm, are physically present, feeling safe to connect with others, and engaging predictable strategies, repetitive activities and routines that reduce reactivity and minimise volatile responses.

Based on the ECEPs data it is apparent that undergraduate training in Early Childhood Education has not kept up with research on brain development (neurobiology) and trauma informed practice. Relationships are central to all facets of child learning from both a neurological and social perspective. Neurobiological research confirms what ECEPs already know, that early childhood is crucial (Meany, 2010; Sims, 2009; Sims, 2011). Effective relationships cannot be fostered when children feel unsafe, insecure and/or stressed. ECEPs can act as a buffer to reduce the neurobiological response to stress and make it possible for the child to learn. A child's brain is pre-programmed for learning (Winter, 2010) during the early years of a child's life this buffer is important as it shapes and frames how the brain develops, which forms the foundation of the health and wellbeing of the future adult (Sims, 2013).

When children are in a brain-enriched environment this acts as an enabler to positive growth and future success.

The common tool used to support children with significant behavioural issues was behaviour management, which can be a deficit model and may not work for children with trauma. ECEPs need professional development to fill the gaps from their undergraduate training. For example, viewing children through the lens of brain development recognises that children affected by trauma have their brains wired differently. ECEPs need to understand what trauma does to the brain and then they can engage with children differently. An informed, empathetic, non-judgemental philosophical stance allows ECEPs to see things from the perspective of children and their families.

Engagement. Once the child and family feel welcomed, included, and respected and ECEPs feel supported and valued, effective and ongoing engagement in early years education, care and development cumulate to provide best practice. Underpinning all this is an ECEC environment that includes: Fostering Relationships, Friendships and Social Networks, Building Trust and Connection.

Fostering relationships. On many levels and in many contexts, fostering relationships is extremely important in the entire early years' process. In building strong relationships between families and ECEPs it is essential that all feel secure and comfortable in the ECEC setting. This is particularly the case if families have experienced trauma and/or their children have special needs. Relationships can be hampered by economic and/or power imbalances between ECEPs and families. The intentional fostering of relationships takes time and commitment to successful engagement by both parties. Relationships can be built in a range of ways that include families feeling that they are heard and ECEPs resisting giving instructions. Strategies to foster relationships could include sharing food at informal meetings and breakfasts, and generally doing things together for example, working bees, volunteering skills in the ECECs, and sharing culture. A combination of empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism are essential in fostering positive relationships with families (Scott et al., 2007). A family partnership model enhances the provision of family-centred services, the development of the essential qualities (respect and empathy) and effective partnership between ECEP's and families (Davis et al., 2002). Purposefully creating opportunities for families to build social connections can also foster relationships with all involved in early years settings.

Friendships and social networks. This study identified growing relationships between families, especially those who share similarities such as having children with disabilities, sharing culture, and experiences of stressors and trauma. A desire for opportunities for making friends and building networks was expressed repeatedly by the participants. The ECEC setting could be a place to deliberately and intentionally encourage friendships and social networks. As well as supporting friendship formation by families it is equally important to facilitate friendships between children. Salmivalli (2010) emphasises the value of fostering friendships to combat feelings of isolation and the effects of trauma. Developing friendships assists in the development of feelings of self-efficacy which underpin engagement and development (Bandura, 1997). Interventions that seek to foster and strengthen close peer friendships create supportive relationships (Fitzpatrick & Bussey, 2014). The developmental significance of having high quality friendships is well established (Rubin et al., 2015). The quality of relationships that families have with their children is very important in early childhood. Quality relationships that children have with their peers further supports children's health, wellbeing and development.

Friendships provide children with social and emotional support that is important for their resilience in times of change and uncertainty, and feelings of happiness and wellbeing (Danby, 2008; Dunn, 2004). The images drawn by the children about their experiences in the ECECs showed how much they valued the relationships with other children, their families and with the ECEPs. Friends can provide strong support networks that can help children feel connected and reduce feelings of anxiety and social isolation. In early years, friendships can facilitate positive outcomes for children and can reduce stress in times of transition and difficulty (Dunn, 2004; Hartup, 1992). Children employ their own ways of making friends, however adults are also significant in how children's relationships are attended to. Compared to those without friends, children with close friendships display higher levels of self-esteem, happiness in an ECEC setting and are less lonely (Rubin et al., 2015). Children's friendships are an important consideration for ECEPs and families, as children spend much time in ECECs and such settings provide children with opportunities to interact with other children and make friends. Rubin, Bukowski and Bowker (2015) note that, "Dyadic relationships have a direct and powerful effect on children's development and psychological wellbeing". Having a friend is important to a child's success in an ECEC. During the preschool years, peer interaction occurs through play and children progress through from solitary play to cooperative play, which enables children to develop cognitively as well as socially. They

learn to take other children's points of view, which promotes perspective taking and empathy (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009).

It has long been established that people form social networks for mutual support and to help deal with challenges. Social networks assist people anticipate, encounter, respond to and integrate difficult experiences into personal and shared schema. In mature established communities people rely on their families, colleagues, and friends to provide a protective membrane. Newcomers may need assistance in the formation of social relationships. Affiliation with others is a protection from disadvantage and vulnerability, which may be linked to prior trauma. It is widely recognised that the most important issue in trauma management is the, "provision and restoration of social support" (Van de Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth, 2012, p. 24). McFarlane and van der Kolk (1996, p. 24), added that, "Emotional attachment is probably the primary protection against feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness". The family unit is the most effective defence against traumatisation for children who can be very resilient as long as they have a caregiver who is emotionally and physically available (Werner, 1989). The family unit itself may need support from community and services.

Building trust. Families who have experienced trauma or stressors may have little reason to trust anyone. It is recognised that, "Following the experience of human rights violations it is often extremely difficult to trust others. Therefore, more time will usually need to be spent in engaging young refugees and establishing trust" (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006, p. 1201). It is not only young refugees who find trust challenging. The need to establish or re-establish trust within relationships requires familiarity and time, and respectful equal partnerships and without this there will always be a gap in involving families in their child's education. Best practice by ECEPs, "begins with an empathetic understanding of children and families" (Sims et al., 2000, p. 46). The social side of the early years experience is crucial in assisting the child to develop and families to flourish in safe protected places surrounded by trusting relationships. As recounted in The Children's Perspective chapter, the children were asked to draw and speak about how they feel about their ECEC setting and their drawings captured a sense of strong positive emotions in their depictions of play with others, particularly peer friendships and connections with family and to a lesser degree ECEPs. The children's commentaries were about playing with friends and spending time together, playing outside, helping one another, playing favourite games, sitting together, sharing lunch and hugging each other, being friendly and nice to each other and caring about their friends.

Friendship and being a friend includes doing things together, having and sharing common interests and experiencing intimate moments of sharing (Corsaro & Molinari, 1990; Hartup, 1992).

Connection. Family-centred Practice and Family Engagement are seen to be key, both in best practice but also its importance has been detailed and discussed at length within this research study. It is a circle of relationships between all stakeholders that are best when established with trust, and feelings of empathy, and with the time to establish familiarity that leads to feelings of connection and understanding. When this occurs many of the key enablers that have been mentioned would be established in principle and in practice. Child and family engagement with ECEC settings is essential to making social connections for vulnerable and disadvantaged families and they are the families that need it, most however least likely to engage (Grace & Bowes, 2010), due to access issues, distrust of services and fear of being judged (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thompson & Wilson, 2010). Connectedness takes time to develop and it happens through listening to families, getting to know them, finding out what's important, understanding the goals they have for their children, caring, respecting and accepting the diverse nature of families and building trust. Genuine family engagement and connection does not occur easily, quickly or by itself (Epstein, 1995), and only happens with effective communication, partnership and collaboration (R. Elliot, 2005; A. Elliot, 2006).

Collaboration. Positive relationships and good communication with families is essential for collaboration. Building and maintaining authentic relationships with families generally, is complex, and even more so for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. ECEP participants have consistently identified in the data that it can be very challenging to put collaboration into practice. Darlington, Feeney and Rixon (2005) note the significance of engaging in collaborative practices when working with families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, including those with a child with a disability (and/or developmental delay), those with mental health or other health issues and those who are socially and/or culturally marginalised. Additionally Darlington & Feeney (2008), document the importance of regular contact and timely communication in the context of relationship building between ECEPs and families as being paramount in developing mutual respect and effective collaboration. Genuine collaboration is strengthened through daily interactions and communications as well as through the open and accepting attitudes of ECEPs and through thoughtful professional practices and carefully considered policies. (Stonehouse, 2012).

As the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) highlights, some key characteristics of collaborative partnerships in working with families and in working together with other ECEPs, include qualities such as empathy, mutual trust, respectful communication, an appreciation of others' knowledge and experience and an openness to others' views, values and perspectives, alongside shared aims and goals (DEEWR, 2010). Some key enablers to collaborative practice include allowing time for ECEPs and families to build and maintain collaboration by focusing on the development of effective and empowered relationships, where there is real trust and empathy and time for genuine listening and respectful communication.

Focusing the attention on nurturing relationships and building trusted networks is essential to collaboration (Hudson, Hardy, Henwood & Wistow, 2003).

Final Comments

Exceptional ECEPs foster "the cultivation of a receptive, compassionate awareness, an attitude of wonder, awe and reverence for life" (Miller, 2006, p. 3).

To conclude, this research study reveals how relationships are central to all aspects of engagement with ECECs and ECEPs by children and families. The phenomenological approach used in this study resonated with this understanding as the formation of empathetic, trusting, respectful relationships, between researcher and participants was essential. These relationships take time to establish. With great trust and candour, all groups have shared their understandings and experiences with the researcher. Families need to feel valued, understood and respected for their role in their child's education and care. Empowering families promotes capacity building. Families also require services that are easily available and accessible with a flexible time frame and without long waiting periods. Continuity is important and allows for familiarity and trust to develop (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010; Moore et al., 2012). Similarly, ECEPs need to feel that they are respected, effective and valued in the roles that they play. They may need time and opportunity to network with others or to spend in building relationships with children and their families. Effective programs are based around relationships, partnerships between stakeholders including families. These relationships must be inclusive and accepting of family values and culture, and must provide continuous care (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010; Moore et al., 2012). The ECEC setting can be a place (an environment) that can positively affect interaction and intervention. The latter can

be a very sensitive issue. In the context of the research intervention was a term, often misunderstood as relating to a Child Protection issue but in fact can include everything from advocacy, assisting with referral pathways, providing programs that support diversity and varying cultures, creating best practice. The same could be said for the terms, early intervention and inclusion. They are not identical although the two approaches may look very similar at times as evidenced in the data from the participants in this study and probably due to the focus on a target population with high proportions of vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children including children with disabilities. The literature also provide minimal clarity on these terms. At the coalface in ECEC settings the two can overlap both in practice and in the thinking of the ECEP participants.

While ECEPs seemed to have a natural or intuitive practice wisdom in working with children, and a compassion for families in need, they also required training, guidance and support to know how to express and enact these ideals. Specifically, ECEPs felt better prepared in working with vulnerable children but wanted further professional development about how to engage with families with complex and multiple needs. Vulnerable and disadvantaged families may need foundational skills, like understanding developmental milestones of their child, how to make a positive learning environment at home, and learning the positive use of communication that can be so effective in providing strong attachment and trust for their children. For children (who are the centre of this research) there is little doubt that teaching them resiliency and protective factors could be positively synergistic into adulthood (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). The process of making meaningful changes in a child's life must be respectful and respond to family context (Raver & Childress, 2015).

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

> Research on child development, the design of social policies, and the delivery of human services for children and families reflect three related yet separated cultures. The capacity to navigate across their borders, to understand their different rules of evidence, to speak their distinctive languages, and to achieve credibility in all three worlds while maintaining a sense of intellectual integrity in each, requires respect for their differences and a commitment to their shared mission. (Shonkoff, 2000, p. 181)

Introduction

This research study explored some key enablers and barriers to engagement at the coalface of early childhood education and care (ECEC) from the perspectives of children and their families who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and the Early Childhood Educators and Professionals (ECEPs) who work with them. The research focussed on understanding aspects of Social Inclusion, Access, Participation and Engagement from different levels and perspectives; at the Systemic/Policy, Service/Organisational, Children and Families—Negotiated everyday practices in response to their needs, and Supporting ECEPs. The findings revealed that the most effective enabler to engagement is building strong, empathetic, collaborative and respectful relationships. Driving this agenda is a social justice perspective that values inclusion, human rights and the development of agency for children, their families and ECEPs. Effective engagement leads to a sense of wellbeing, and social skills development within positive relationships in the ECEC setting, within families, and in the community. This research study advocates a socio-emotional approach to ECEC. While cognitive skills and economic success are important, there is often too much emphasis on these in developed societies. In the ECEC setting children and their families can find safety, the space and time to explore and grow, to be happy, feel nurtured, and purposeful. The need for effective communication within all aspects of secure relationships, is essential for trust to develop in order to deliver the best outcome for the child. My research recognises that effective communication based on empathy helps build protective factors for children and families. A Family Engagement Model needs to include a focus on the attributes of relationships that vulnerable families have identified as important, as well as communication of values, learning tools, support processes and responses in an empathetic manner that aims toward developing trust in a sincere, open and honest way.

Applying a socio-cultural and ecological perspective, human learning is a social process and knowledge is co-constructed then internalised (Vygotsky, 1978). Relationships can affect the internal development of individuals as they encounter their environment. The external affects mental states. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective gives an overarching theoretical framework to understand human development, the importance of child development and the child in the wider context of family, social connections, community and society and the range of different contexts in which the child is embedded (Scott, 2009). These two theories have underpinned this research. The qualitative approach selected for this research allowed the researcher to explore and map the social world and inner perspectives of the participants. Resonant with my research focus, my methodological approach was hermeneutic phenomenology. Specifically, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which explores how people understand their life within their own contexts and life-world. This method allowed the participants to share their understanding through a range of data collection strategies: a contextualising survey, semi-structured interviews, and children's drawings. In the interviews and conversations, open-ended questions allowed reflective and considered responses about how participants saw the enablers and barriers to their role, situation, issues, values and needs.

This research study was situated in the ECEC services of Family and Children's Services Department of the Knox City Council. This community includes significant pockets of disadvantage, yet it has a long history and commitment to serving those in need. By couching this study within a local area that offered a microcosm of serious social challenges, the findings indicate that change is possible even when faced with considerable difficulties. This study can be understood as a critical case, as the findings have, "strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (Flyvberg, 2006, p. 229). It is not always possible to determine whether a case is critical in advance. I believe that this case is "interesting in a paradigmatic context" and I have provided collectively acceptable reasons for my choice of case (Flyvberg, 2006, p. 233). As discussed in the previous chapters, the children and their families, and the ECEPs in this study have built strong, respectful, collaborative relationships that act as enablers to engage in the ECEC process. The number of initiatives and programs provided by the Knox City Council to support the families' experience has grown since the beginning of this research. Some of which include: Family and Children's Services KEYS Online, GoVolunteer, Planning for Knox Early Years Hubs, and the Integrated Collaborative

Practice Framework across Family and Children's Services Department; all of which aim to improve the experience of families.

This study has led to the development of a new model for engagement and relationship building. This new model emerged from my research and aims to support ECEPs understanding of the broader context in which these families experiencing vulnerability are situated and to stimulate discussion amongst ECEPs and families about raising awareness of issues regarding social inclusion, access, engagement and participation. The researcher acknowledges that this or any other model on its own is unlikely to solve all the issues referred to in this study. However, I feel confident that its consideration as a useful tool, is a step in the right direction for meaningful application in ECEC settings.

Research Question and Outcomes

This research was driven by the following question: ***What are the enablers and barriers for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children, including those with disabilities and their families, in accessing, maintaining engagement and successfully learning and developing within an educational program?***

The findings of this study revealed the enablers and their concomitant barriers encapsulated in Figure 9, presented earlier in the Discussion chapter, and repeated here.

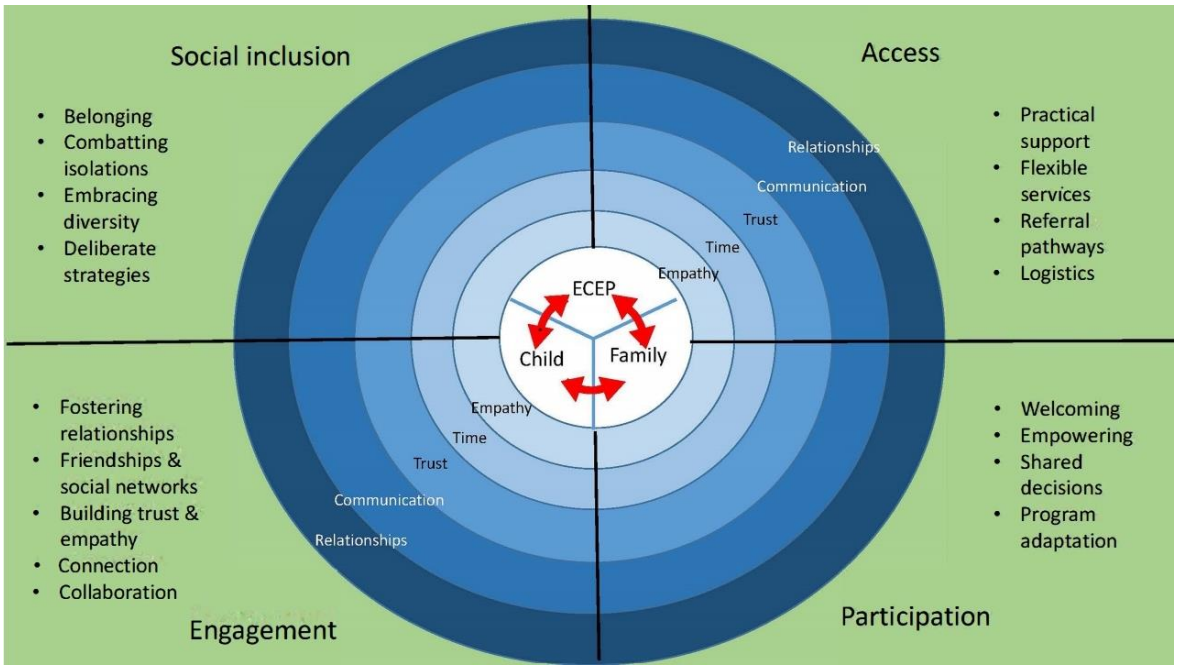


Figure 9 Core elements of effective engagement (repeat)

The quadrants of the model are: Social Inclusion, Access, Participation, and Engagement. Each quadrant contains enablers that if not present form barriers. Each quadrant has been discussed at length in the Discussion chapter.

Social inclusion is value-based and requires an attitude or belief that all people have the right to be included and feel a sense of belonging, are able to foster relationships, to be understood and understand, to experience a connection with others, and to combat isolation. This is true for all stakeholders, and it is thought that all people require these needs to be met to live a happy and prosperous life and experience wellbeing within their life-world. If people do not feel a sense of social inclusion they will experience a sense of disconnection from their community. Social inclusion can be understood as a series of opportunities that offer a framework for enhancing participation and connectedness (Friendly & Lero, 2002). An example of such opportunities for enhancing social inclusion can be resolving the logistical barriers that children and their families encounter such as transport to access ECECs. Monetary issues also impacted families' ability to access ECECs. The resolution of access issues is essential for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Access was more than logistical concerns and also referred to ECEPs being flexible, having the time and space to engage with families and to assist them with practical support and information, such as referrals and answering questions about the progress or needs of their child. In this, time constraints were a big factor. It was noted that ECEPs who had access to information, referral pathways, and knowledge about monetary concessions, could enable families once they have first made contact. As the research continued it seemed that families' feelings, perceptions and prior experiences often engendered feelings of distrust in services that might prevent attendance and continued participation. With time, empathy and trust this distrust could be overcome.

Participation meant providing parents with, a reason to become involved in their child's ECEC through a practice of welcoming families, meeting them before day one of care, being open, having continuity and developing familiarity and trust in relationships. Raising parents' awareness about the significance of the value of quality ECEC was essential. ECEPs can foster parental participation and engagement in their child's education and care by supporting families in their sense of agency and self-efficacy, building resilience in children and parents. To achieve this, it is necessary to strengthen communities and social supports, and develop innovative approaches and strategies of sustainability (Schorr, 1997). Enhanced participation may have flow on effects for families, improving employment options and reducing reliance on public health and social services (Elliott, 2006).

As the, "cornerstone of society" family engagement is crucial (Ashman & Elkins, 2012). Research indicates that, "parenting factors are among the strongest predictors of a range of psychosocial and developmental problems in children" (Victoria—OPA, 2003, p. 70). Engagement occurs when families embrace their child's early years' experiences, become actively involved, share in the decision-making around their child's future, collaborate with ECEPs and are involved in facilitating a positive home environment ready for learning. In ECEC settings, families and children become part of environments that foster community engagement. Communities need to step in and review their policies/practices and share their philosophies and values, be accountable in their actions, transparent in their viewpoints, supporting best practice models, valuing inclusion and embracing diversity. When ECEPs came from a position of empathy, and trust that developed over time allowing familiarity and continuity, authentic and sustainable engagement occurred giving families a sense of worth and validity

All the elements in the model (Figure 9) centre on the relationship between the child, the family and the ECEP. Education is a place, process and experience and while the child may be stuck in a complex life-world, through education, the positive aspects of social engineering can occur with the hope to alleviate poverty, vulnerability, disadvantage and the difficulties associated with disabilities. The findings of this study identify strategies that can be undertaken to further enhance health, wellbeing, learning and development. These strategies are: Understanding Children and their Families, Supporting Practitioners, Intervention, Wellbeing, and Risk and Resilience.

Understanding Children and their Families

For families, the need to participate in their child's early years can be supported through the formation of groups in which they can feel accepted and included. The ECEC setting can and must find ways to fill this gap for children and their families who might not otherwise have an opportunity to form such connections. It is necessary to engender a, "readiness to change" model that understands parents' intention to engage with family support services (Korfmacher et al., 2000; McCurdy & Daro, 2001). This research study revealed that families' engagement was more complex than expected and encompassed access issues, perceptions, feelings and attitudes toward education, and relationships (established or not) within the ECEC setting. An unanticipated finding in this study was the specific need, expressed by families to experience and develop friendships with the ECEPs and with other

families. Families needed the opportunity to network socially with others as they often felt isolated, misunderstood or that they were being judged. ECEPs could plan for family friendly places within the ECEC setting to allow friendships to develop.

The children in this study also indicated the importance of relationships with ECEPs, their families and their friends. Developing social and emotional capabilities is a priority for all children and their families but particularly so for those experiencing vulnerabilities, disadvantage and/or disabilities. The findings of this study indicate that a social approach that fosters positive relationships is crucial. When families feel safe and they trust the ECEPs they work with, to further their children's education, there can be a flow on effect to their home life. Relationships and communication built via an empathetic approach was extremely important in the development of connections that require and allow meaning making. A combination of the key enablers, successful social skills and effective communication skills, resulted in better relationships and were shown to be required for development, particularly at the early years' stage.

Positive communication is crucial in building effectual relationships. Behind effective communication sits empathy, time and trust. This is necessary for ECEPs and for families as they guide their children. Communication should come from an honest, sincere and empathetic approach that over time develops trust between all stakeholders. This research encountered aspects of effective teacher/child interactions for supporting children in their overall development. Effective interactions include the creation of engaging and beautiful learning spaces, valuing children's play, fostering learning, curiosity and imagination, questioning and problem solving, and building strong relationships. It is also noted that children should be co-constructors of, "curriculum, knowledge, and classroom community" (Follari, 2015, p. 12). Without empathetic and respectful communication in relationships there can be a strong and distinct barrier between stakeholders. In responding to the need for families to be accepted and feel a sense of belonging, a position of empathy was necessary in all communication and engagement and this could act as a protective factor for families, children and ECEPs.

Responding to the needs of children and their families are closely linked. Enabling one means enabling the other. The concept of family-centred practice has existed for some time. Sharing decision-making and including families in their child's education is essential. Responding to the needs of children requires the understanding that the child is an emotional

being who may be at risk of psychological harm due to a broad range of situations. The children and families in this study are self-identified as being at risk. Risk factors can have a tendency to multiply over time and continue into adulthood. Scott (2015, p. 17) notes that, "when negative early experiences occur a child's long-term physical and mental health issues, [adult] social disadvantage, alcoholism and suicide rates increase reducing resiliency and leading to poorer outcomes, wellbeing, or success". Teaching resiliency and protective factors gives children strong foundations and fulfils their attachment needs.

When working with children it is necessary that teaching is intentional and involves, "thoughtful, sensitive interactions between educators and children that can support, challenge and extend children's learning" (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 28). In the preferred key worker or key contact person model children have one adult in whom they can trust with the hope of giving them more secure foundations particularly if they have stressors at home. Children who are securely attached to their caregivers in childcare demonstrate more prosocial behaviours, peer play, empathy, independence and are more achievement oriented (Mardell, 1992; Sims et al., 2005).

This research study further looks at the fundamental components of a child's life that are thought to be characterised by, "*belonging*, *being* and *becoming* within their context" (Australian Government, DEEWR, EYLF, 2009), as a child needs to thrive within this life-world. Further, protection, inclusion, support, resiliency, validation and empowerment impact alongside these ideals as part of a child's fulfilment. In addition, wellness as a goal for children and their families', is an ideal existing along a continuum and includes, "competence, resilience, social system modification and empowerment" (Cowen, 1991). Humans can be self-actualising and education, "can be understood as a form of social engineering that can aim to advance wellness" (Benard, 1991). It is important to note here that education can intervene in positive ways to reduce impacts of the cycle of disadvantage. It is also widely recognised that early childhood development occurs within the context of the parent-child relationship.

Supporting Early Childhood Educators and Professionals

Focusing on relationships, friendships and networking can mean that there can be a blurring of the lines between work in the ECEC and social work to assist families and children. Families needed to be invited to engage and the ECEPs needed to make

opportunities for this engagement both relevant and applicable within this sector. For example, fostering relationships with peers around their shared connections as parent or care provider for children. ECEPs explained that they needed support and that time was their most significant current constraint and desired enabler. Adequate staffing and resources were also identified and these supports included funding, teacher aides, consultants, and volunteers (particularly parents). ECEPs felt the need to learn more about relationships. ECEPs have good intentions but social change over time means that understandings need to be reconsidered and adjusted. This may require professional development. ECEPs expressed a desire for professional development in skills around communication and empathy, how to convey these things and why they are so important. ECEPs also spoke about the need for networking, specifically mentioning the provision of more mentoring opportunities from which they could learn alongside other more experienced ECEPs. When a mentor is empathetic and understanding the ECEP can feel that they are in a place of trust where they can discuss their understandings, reflections and concerns about their work with the children and their families.

> Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision making about children's learning. As professionals, early childhood educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change. (EYLF, 2009, p. 12)

It is essential that ECEPs recognise and acknowledge the opportunities and challenges involved in supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Promoting positive approaches such as self-care and compassion and self-reflection with ECEPs and providing mentoring to support ECEPs own understanding of their gaps in knowledge and skills and advocate for ECEPs to seek support as needed.

Resonating with Brown and Johnson (2015), this research found that ECEPs felt uncertainties and difficulties in delivering culturally sensitive materials and programs even though they felt willing and able to embrace all cultures. The acceptance or marginalisation of culturally diverse people can occur in all areas of society. There are a number of these culturally diverse groups, such as families from ATSI, CALD, and refugee backgrounds found in the Knox Municipality. When faced with such a cdemographic ECEPs need to have the knowledge and skills to intervene around cultural issues and sensitivity within the

classroom (Ridley et al., 1994). Although many ECEPs undoubtedly have practice wisdom and a positive attitude to the children and their families, my data found that some professionals thought they might become stale or fatigued without ongoing training that inspires and tackles difficulties.

ECEC provides an opportunity to influence developmental pathways and ECEPs need to, "promote consistent, nurturing relationships between childcare professionals and children in which each child's needs are recognised and responded to sensitively" (Hart & Rubia, 2012, p. 9). When children have experienced trauma it can affect brain development and lead to health, wellbeing and behavioural problems. Adversity and the impact of parental psychological and behavioural disorders lead to developmental changes in infants and young children affecting the interface between genes, environment and experience.

Early years can provide a trajectory for future success and access to responsive, stable caregivers who support the development of emotional, cognitive, and physical growth (Hart & Rubia, 2012). Early experiences can have a powerful effect on brain development but experiencing vulnerabilities, disadvantage and neglect may impede neurodevelopment (Hart & Rubia, 2012). Experiences change the brain and optimal brain development relies upon good nutrition, good health and a nourishing and stimulating environment. These contributing factors in early years play an important role in developing the brain's social-emotional function as the ability to shape the brain decreases over time (Oberklaid, 2008). Fostering nurturing, responsive relationships builds healthy brain architecture that provides a strong base for the learning behaviours and health of children. For this reason ECEC needs to be understood as critical early learning as "it is biologically and economically more efficient to support the optimal development of the brain during a child's early years than try to resolve problems that may arise later in life due to dysfunctional brain development" (Oberklaid, 2008, p. 8). In the ECEC environments, ECEPs can begin the process of guiding children in understanding risk, providing them with positive attachment and, support in resiliency development, particularly for those whose natural disposition is not as protective of self as others.

The brains of young children who experience chronic and severely stressful situations and conditions are being flooded by cortisol (stress hormone) for an extended period of time, which can have a toxic effect on the brain. There is good evidence that early environmental adversity is associated with neural network abnormalities in areas of the brain responsible for

memory, attention, impulsiveness and behavioural regulation and control. Without responsive care, the stress levels of children, "are not managed appropriately [and] they experience chronic stress [with] consequences biologically, behaviourally, socially and in their health" (Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2005, p. 6). Intervention is absolutely crucial and can occur within the ECEC setting and within relationships with ECEPs and between families and children.

Intervention

Intervention can take many forms depending on the needs of the child and family. This may occur at any point in children and their families' engagement within the ECEC setting but early intervention is crucial in working towards learning, development and wellbeing. Interventions can make substantial and positive impacts and occur in high quality programs. These are, "strong predictors of later social and educational outcomes and also have important social and economic impacts on families" (Elliott, 2006, p. 54). An intervention could be enacted for a child who presents with difficulties in their emotional competence to achieve better attachment outcomes through attitudes and approaches of empathy, time and trust.

Having a key worker model is necessary to foster the wellbeing of a child and/or family. ECEPs can teach positive relationships and communication approaches by through modelling this practice, but also through effectively using programs and curricula. Moore (2015) summarised that best practice interventions are relationship-based, involve partnerships between professionals and parents, target goals that parents prioritise, offer parents choices, build parental competencies, are non-stigmatising, possess cultural awareness and sensitivity, and provide a continuity of care. Using a humanitarian and values-based approach that empowers, is a necessity for successful intervention. Teaching foundational skills to affect behavioural change in families aims at protecting the child but simultaneously it is hoped it will influence and benefit families who are in need. It is essential to see children and families from their perspective, understanding their context, their influences, and their needs. This research revealed that families sought an empathetic and non-judgmental relationship with ECEPs. Empathy appears to be critical so it should be addressed in early childhood teacher education programs as a means to bridge relationships between teachers and families (Peck et al., 2015).

Wellbeing

All of these strategies assist in building a sense of wellbeing, understood as a supportive, nurturing, caring and consistent environment in children's homes and in the ECEC environments (Elliot, 2006). The Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2009) emphasises that wellbeing occurred when children felt a strong sense of connection, optimism, and engagement, which enabled the development of a positive attitude towards learning. Connecting with families and supporting their parenting and caring roles can positively influence children and their families' wellbeing. When relationships with families are warm and trusting, ECEPs are in a good position to work collaboratively with families to promote the overall learning, development and wellbeing for the child. Despite huge social advances, many young children continue to be maltreated, traumatised and live in inhumane environments. This has meant that many children cannot self-regulate, connect with others, so are at, "greater risk for emotional, cognitive, and physical health problems" (Perry, 2006, p. 28). Children, "living in poverty are often found to lag behind their more affluent peers in terms of academic, social, and behavioral outcomes" (Scaramella et al., 2008, p. 731). Jorden and Sketchley (2009) advocate human rights for all people including children for optimal health, growth and development. This research recognises the child as the focal point and that the early years should be a protected, special space where children have the time to learn, grow and engage with others (Mittler, 2000). In the Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, DEEWR, 2009) it is asserted that children should "learn to interact in relationships with others through care, empathy and respect" (p. 21).

Society needs to ensure that it supports parents with resources (Reading et al., 2008). Adopting a children's rights perspective can maintain the focus on young children's experiences and their rights to social participation, health and happiness (Jordan & Sketchley, 2009). The early years are pivotal to positive outcomes for children and their families, because these set a trajectory for the years ahead. Education can improve the social and economic situations of people (Machin, 2006). Children living in poverty are significantly more likely to experience delays in language, early cognitive and social-emotional development, due to the lack of opportunity and support that keeps them in the cycle of disadvantage. Over time, the perceived achievement gap between these children and their peers widens (Janus & Duku, 2007; Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008).

Risk and Resilience

A sense of resilience built on the premise of a sense of connectedness and belonging to an environment (in this case ECEC) (Resnick et al., 1997; Blum 2005; Cahill, Beadle, Farrelly, Forster & Smith, 2016). A sense of personal resilience can result in positive physical and mental health, and academic outcomes and academic self-efficacy (Blum 2005; Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes & Patton 2007; Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Cahill et al., 2016). Environmental contexts are extremely important in early childhood development, as genes and environments interact to shape a persons' physical, cognitive, psychological functioning, and that stimulating and nurturing environments during the pre-birth, infancy and early childhood years are crucial to brain development. Risk factors include a child's own characteristics, aspects of the child's family functioning, possibly unstable income, housing, conflicted family relationships and community issues or high levels of crime, drug and alcohol use, family violence. The Knox City Council is proactive in addressing community challenges.

There is still much to learn about how to best foster resilience, particularly for children who grow up in adverse conditions and circumstances. It is the interaction of risk and protective factors that, "through their combined and cumulative effects, shape the developmental trajectories of children" (Fox et al., 2015, p. 26). It is essential to consider the impact of risk and protective factors on the developmental pathway and, "Knowledge of the evidence base regarding [this] is critical to designing effective interventions" (Rutter, 2007, p. 3). Research around this issue is gaining momentum. The word resilience describes the:

> capacity people have to cope, learn and thrive in the face of change, challenge or adversity. Some children and young people find it harder than others to cope with the challenges they face in life. All children and young people develop coping strategies to help them deal with stress and challenge. (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2014, p. 1)

Resilience occurs, "as positive adaptation over time, not at a single point" (Rutter, 2007, p. 3). Resiliency factors include self-awareness and control, self-esteem, social awareness and management, responsibility, effort and persistence, positive coping strategies and problem-solving skills. Resiliency factors within the individual context that can be linked to characteristics of risk include disability, poor health, poor attachment and chronic illness

(DET, 2014). While it is thought that positive predispositions can be taught and learnt, some children are placed at risk due to environmental factors that impact on their early development and even the growth of socio-emotional factors that make them less resilient. How this could be included in the ECEC setting needs exploration. This could be through values-based ECEC programs, relationships fostered between all stakeholders and specific approaches to provide foundational and protective factors for their child. These resiliency factors, particularly important for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, are a comparatively new focus within ECEC and are included within the curriculum and learning frameworks that guide the teaching approaches.

The recent Wellbeing Practice Guide (2016) identifies:

> The wellbeing of children in vulnerable circumstances is at risk. In addition, significant life-changing events, such as serious illness, family separation and bereavement can have a negative impact on all children. Planned and coordinated support is crucial to mitigate some of the risk factors associated with these events to ensure the most vulnerable children and families are effectively supported. (p. 19)

Implications

Against a backdrop of globalisation and the advance of technologies, it seems that there is a rebirth of community with many people adopting a social justice perspective rather than a neo-liberal, economic rationale. Ideally, communities should empower all its members, to accept diversity and foster inclusion. In ECEC settings, this means framing policies that are underpinned by social justice, fostering collaborative practices and providing real support for all stakeholders. The implications of this research are addressed under three themes: Policy and Practice, Collaborative Practice, and Services and Programs.

Policy and practice. Researchers and policymakers sometimes seem to speak a different language. Policy and scaffolding frameworks are necessary as they give common ground that can help ECEPs negotiate their everyday experiences and guide practice. Policy frameworks that enable inclusion and a team approach to working with children and families can support best practice. Currently there are well-structured and effective international and federal, state and local Australian government policies and frameworks that provide ECEPs common ground for dialogue, guidance, and best practice, but there is little in the form of

specific descriptions of practical ways to implement acceptance, inclusion and belonging. Effective and sustainable changes in this field can be slow.

For ECEPs who have worked for decades in the field, policies, frameworks and best practice models have shifted since their first qualifications and training. ECEPs might have extensive practice wisdom and many years of experience, but the structure of society, families and how early childhood is perceived has changed and without new learning ECEPs cannot respond as successfully as before. The problems of families can be complicated, with multiple factors that may place children at high risk. The packaged nature of these family and parental problems are often intergenerational which means that single input services are responding only to one aspect of a family's circumstance. Without policies that support collaborative cross sector engagement, the work of the ECEPs will be compromised. It is essential that those who frame and write policy concerning these issues listen to the voices of the ECEPs who are at the coalface of engagement with families. It is also imperative that the voices of the children and their families are heard. Not only would such attentive listening inform better and more relevant policies but also it would empower ECEPs and positively affect the children and families from their ECECs. The importance of respectful engagement is firmly embedded and recognised in various cited Australian social policies, however implementing this remains a challenge. It is essential to engage families as partners around their perceptions, needs and priorities. By creating the right environment, families can identify and utilise their strengths, capacities and resources (Fenton, Walsh, Wong & Cumming, 2015).

Communities are also stakeholders in achieving best practice in ECECs and should embrace diversity and social justice for real change to occur. A family-centred strengths-based approach with the child as the focal point is at the centre of this research. Meaning-making, relationship building, collaborative and partnership approaches that revolve around communication are crucial. Best practice aims to build resiliency and protective factors for children and their families. Adopting a Family Engagement Model, that explores and supports the issues, together with teaching, modelling, curriculum, and programming approaches to ECEC, enables children and families. It may be that ECEPs require specific professional development and training around all of these factors.

Collaborative practice. Collaborative practice and a partnership approach seemed ideal for ECEP participants. They felt the need for a cross-sector approach that would assist them in working with children and families, giving them better insight as to how they can

help them with their needs, particularly when they are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The ECEPs all felt that they required more time to be able to fulfil their duties at a level that adequately addresses the needs of vulnerable children and families. They experienced definite time constraints and believed that if they had better awareness of the children and their families' needs and better understanding of referral pathways they could collaborate with other services. Currently it is recognised that, "Information sharing is reliant on manual efforts and relationships, and represents a significant administrative burden" (Victorian Government, 2015, p. 7). There is increasing evidence that a lack of collaboration between services can be unhelpful to children, their parents and ECEPs. Involvement with a large number of different services can be overwhelming for families at times of crisis and the failure of services to work together can have devastating consequences (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 16). It is also important that families feel they do not have to explain their story repeatedly to gain the referrals or guidance they need as this causes fatigue and frustration possibly resulting in withdrawal.

For individual ECEPs, collaborative practices could offer support and mentorship in community with other professionals. Applying Wenger's model of Communities of Practice (2008), participants could come together in Bhabha's third space (1994) to discuss in open dialogue current and ongoing issues; these are effective platforms to expand the discussion. ECEPs desired having the time and space for this to occur.

> Communities of practice as a theoretical tool help illuminate how the 'taken for-grantedness' of early childhood education takes place. Meaning in communities of practice is possible only when ideas are jointly understood and enacted within a particular community. Meaning does not reside in an individual or even in printed matter, but, rather, meaning exists through a dynamic process of living in the world. Early childhood curriculum cannot exist unless a community gives it meaning and brings it into existence. (Fleer, 2003, p. 76-77)

Collaboration also meant that participants were more loyal to the project, and felt that their ideas and practices were more valued and that they could learn from one another and problem solve more easily. Collaboration was not seen as an outcome but rather as a process, that allowed for ideas, values, self-reflection, sharing of strengths and weaknesses and uncertainties, and sponsored trust and growth. Collaboration can include partnering with families regarding their child's education, so that all involved become empowered through the

notion of scaffolding that guides rather than provides solutions. This research study recognises the notion of exchange that empowers (Bourdieu, 2011), and this is necessary to understand how people and communities function. Policy, economy, ideas and values, organisations and community support frame the collaborations between ECEPs and children and their families. (Salveron, Arney & Scott, 2006). Successful collaborations have the following attributes: a common agenda and shared vision, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities as part of a plan of action, continuous joint communication and common language, and a supportive independent organisation keeping all partners focused on the strategic plan and goals (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Collaboration is about sharing and coming together but there were few opportunities described in this research by ECEPs, either amongst themselves or for and with families. This might reflect on current practice that does not use these partnership-based values and practices or cross-sector work in light of issues of privacy and confidentiality. Such practices need to be further revised as the role of the ECEP is crucially important and can only be best served by bringing together all stakeholders within the life of the child in the hope for a more holistic approach in the ECEC sector. Comprehensive wrap around services are indicated for families with complex, multiple needs. By broadening the range of service responses to mission led organisations, ECEC services can offer a combination of policy setting, and quality workforce development, as required.

Services and programs. From a service/organisational level, the ECEC setting is a place where enabling change can begin. ECEPs are at the frontline, the coalface of education and can be hugely influential and transformative in teaching, guiding and participating in principles and practices that acknowledge a values-driven, human rights perspective. From here, these ideals can be transformed into the values that communities can adopt. Transformation can begin in the ECEC environments with relationships developed at this level. The ECEPs need to be qualified and trained and ready to respond when they meet children and families in need as, “Quality outcomes for children are most likely when competent, qualified staff interact with small groups of children in enriched environments” (Elliott, 2006, p. 31). “When educators create [enriched]environments in which children experience mutually enjoyable, caring and respectful relationships with people and the environment, children respond accordingly” (EYLF, 2009, p. 25). Services and programs need to be flexible, consistent and responsive, providing a calm, relaxed and harmonious environment with opportunities for effective communication about the specific needs of current children and families facing adversity. It is important that families can feel

comfortable to speak openly with ECEPs about any areas of concern and that ECEPs can feel confident to link families to additional support services as needed.

Support for an integrated service approach while seen as important, is thought to be complex and requires a lot of time. As different organisations have support subgroups, services need to work together and support a, "diffusion of innovation" in which ideas, products, policies, programs and even ways of working are, "communicated over time among members of a social system or organisation" (Rogers, 2003, p. 35). Program and curriculum responses show that high quality care can make crucial impacts on children in their early years that continue with them in their later life. Sims et al. (2005) explain that:

> The principles (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2001a) covered areas associated with relationships between caregivers and children, (this includes treating children with respect, developing relationships with families, ensuring programmes focus on children feeling safe and on meeting the individual needs of children) and management practices that ensure staff remain in their positions long enough to be able to develop and maintain relationships with children. (pp. 30-31)

In an integrated and collaborative approach, people can share knowledge, experience and expertise for best possible actions and outcomes.

Developing life or social skills can be as important in a child's education as cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy. The implications for education as a whole is that there needs to be a shift from the primary concern with cognitive development to teaching children, and continuing with adolescents, good values, good behaviours and even morality. In today's society, the role of the ECEP as a educator respected for providing guidance in the individual's life has disintegrated due to changing societal thinking. Educators need to be deliberately and intentionally a role model for the child, guiding them through scaffolding and embracing such values as diversity, cultural acceptance, inclusion of all people, empowerment and humanitarian ideals. Families need be taught how to support protective factors at home and create a positive learning space for children in their home environment.

By engaging with different community groups, it may be possible to foster relationships for families. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous and GROW (friends and family of the mentally ill) both create a place and space for belonging, understanding and inclusion that can give families an additional means of protecting their children and supporting themselves. Family Services also have an important role to play in engaging with

parents and supporting family wellbeing as a whole and might offer support for such groups as:

> Early Intervention, Mentoring, Parenting programs, pregnancy education and support, peer support, parenting, nutrition, parenting education and resources, young parents, non-metropolitan families, teenagers who are mothers or pregnant, vulnerable parents, non-English speaking background sole parents, parents with young children in rural areas, CALD communities, parents with disabilities, children educationally at risk, Indigenous CALD communities, [families] socio-economic status, fathers, children with disabilities. (Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009, p. 16)

From the data, these different special focus groups could be utilised to form networks for families so that they may feel understood, connected, and experience a sense of belonging. For communities and within cross sector ECEC settings, success comes through programs that provide, "collaboration and child and family-sensitive practice workshops [that] build capacity within agencies and community and a critical mass of … collaborating practitioners" (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 11). Community can be an opportunity for inclusion and belonging in a globalised world with individualism and disconnection on a mass scale on the rise.

Limitations

The research includes data from one hundred and sixteen participants from three stakeholder groups: ECEPs, families and children. The study is contextualised within a local community where there is a clear need for effective engagement between stakeholders. The phenomenological approach employed allowed for themes to be revealed in this small-scale, but deep and find-grained study. As an insider, the researcher's own understanding, is acknowledged and bracketed. The process of meaning making is dynamic and rigorous. The research required significant sifting of issues and ideas to find both practical and philosophical responses to the enablers and barriers reported. This research study has revealed unexpected findings concerning the enablers and barriers in ECEC participation and processes. Rather than using a quantitative approach based around finding statistics to support or disprove a hypothesis, the importance of dialogue in this IPA study sought to understand the lived experiences of the participants and allowed the voices of all participants to be heard. Anticipated enablers and barriers were not identified at the outset but the data was allowed to speak for itself. New and unexpected information in relation to the research question was

discovered by thinking outside the box, rather than being tied to a results driven analysis, as a result. Every enabler and barrier, might not be revealed, but the most important ones that were shared by participants came to light. This allowed the research to begin with a sense of tangibility allowing a focus of what is really occurring at the frontline perspective of ECEC. Data collection strategies were open ended and provided time and space for different perspectives and understandings to emerge.

Future Research

This study has revealed many avenues for future research. Some of these are discussed here. Further research could involve working with ECEPs about how their roles can be developed and extended to support vulnerable children and their families. Issues of mentoring, cross sector engagement, and professional development could be addressed. The adoption of the new Family Engagement Model and a new Collaborative Practice Framework could be researched with a focus on implementation in ECEC and other sectors. Further research could explore practices that might assist ECEPs with issues concerning being time-poor such as setting up a staff support network. Further research might also include and address wider communities' perceptions and preconceived ideas in relation to vulnerable children and families. The importance of a study such as this has become apparent from this research, through the real need expressed by families at risk to feel belonging, understanding, and connection, and to reduce their sense of isolation.

Research could focus on how best to engage families in the education of their children. Families need support, building protective capabilities and resilience. This study has identified the importance of family-to-family networking which is a relatively unconsidered form of capacity building. This might also include intergenerational engagement, for example for refugee families who are comparatively isolated in their communities. There could be a focus on efficacious communication strategies between ECEPs and families to support the education of children. Longitudinal studies could follow children from their ECECs into mainstream schools and families into community-based programs to understand ongoing needs for support and validation. The ECEC sector might also benefit from a study informed by data collection focussed on family belonging, engagement, parental modelling experiences, in particular how the role of formation of groups connecting families in similar circumstances, such as, families with disabilities, families from a particular culture/ethnicity, single mothers/fathers might be a positive influence.

Investigating the implementation of an ECEC mentor program for families, utilising volunteers such as parents who have experienced vulnerability and disadvantage themselves and have overcome those difficulties, could provide another avenue for further research.

Research could provide evidence for policy makers and educators to improve their values-based approach to teaching and learning. It is essential to move past representations of people as statistical categories and see vulnerable and disadvantaged families and their children with hope and in a positive light. This would lead to the creation and maintenance of opportunities to achieve success even if beginning from a difficult place in the early years. Encouraging a value-based perspective, communicating these effectively, through tools to encourage empathy, trust, openness, honesty, sincerity and connection is necessary. The findings of this research supports the development of new frameworks, program models, professional development, course and teaching materials, a family engagement model, a collaborative practice framework model, and/or contributions to policy development directions. Each of these areas are worthy of further research. In all this it is vital to listen to the voices of stakeholders. Carstenson (2012) asks the question how it is possible to, "Strengthen the role of the citizens?" (p. 21). This idea and what it means for "inclusion" of all members of the community, demands exploration.

Concluding Remarks

Many of the early childhood intervention programs, characterised by high quality service delivery, reported a range of very positive outcomes for children including better academic, behavioural and social skills (Schweinhart, Weikart & Larner, 1986). There is some hope that amongst all the difficulties vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families' experience, research and policy are now focussing on this sector from a human rights perspective. With further understanding of the role of risk and resiliency factors new strategies may come to pass and effect further policy, curriculum, and programs that will advance this sector and result in improvements leading to sustained success for children and their families.

A Family Engagement Model is thought to improve outcomes for children and increase qualities of relationships with ECEPs and within communities with the desire for a positive synergistic result. It is hoped that families will be included within ECEC settings. This is based around relationships, connection, communication, trust, and open and honest

approaches. It is also thought that this will assist ECEPs in understanding families and how to approach and work with them in the education of their children. This will require specific values and tools to promote empathy through communication and assist families to learn that communication tools can assist a child's attachment, foundation and develop protective factors. It is important to guide families toward a positive home learning environment and healthy expectations for their child, which can support lifelong development and learning. Early intervention is essential and this can occur in the early years through ECEC services.

This research found that both ECEPs and families shared an understanding that empathy, trust and time proved key to effective relationships. This study suggests the need for more collaborative practices and the acceptance of a Family Engagement Model, a new model for relationship building. This new model of family engagement has potential to support ECEPs' understandings of the broader context in which vulnerable families are situated, and to stimulate discussion amongst ECEPs and families about raising awareness of the enablers and barriers for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage (including those with disabilities) regarding inclusion, access, participation and engagement in ECEC settings.

This research has sparked thinking around the role of communities participating in and/or being part of, the early years' experience. A sense of validation as a pro-active participant and citizen is crucial for families so that they see themselves as connected and belonging, particularly when they are families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. For communities to embrace social justice issues it is a necessity for the community to understand the enablers and barriers members of their community perceive, and in fact face, in ECEC settings, giving meaning to the need for those members to find transparency and accountability in the philosophies and practice of the ECEC sector. To get it right within community, values, practices and approaches that support inclusion, access, participation and engagement, while developing a sense of belonging and continuity, together with embracing diversity in a way that is humane, empowers all of its citizens, including those children and families who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Monash University Ethics Committee Approval

MONASH University

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Research Office

Human Ethics Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

Project Number:	**CF14/3535 - 2014001849**
Project Title:	**Early childhood services and the facilitation of vulnerable and disadvantaged families**
Chief Investigator:	**Assoc Prof Jane Southcott**
Approved:	**From: 14 January 2015 to 14 January 2020**

Terms of approval - ***Failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.***

1. The Chief investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project (including changes in personnel):** Require the submission of a Request for Amendment form to MUHREC and must not begin without written approval from MUHREC. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. This is determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

[redacted]

Professor Nip Thomson
Chair, MUHREC

cc: Ms Wendy Roberts

Postal – Monash University, Vic 3800, Australia
Building 3E, Room 111, Clayton Campus, Wellington Road, Clayton
[redacted] http://www.monash.edu.au/researchoffice/human/
ABN 12 377 614 012 CRICOS Provider #00008C

Appendix B Department of Education and Training Ethics Approval

Department of
Education & Training

Strategy & Review Group

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9637 2000
DX 210083
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

2014_002569

Ms Wendy Roberts
18 Milton Street
HEATHMONT 3135

Dear Ms Roberts

Thank you for your application of 27 November 2014 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled *Early childhood services and the facilitation of vulnerable and disadvantaged families*.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Training.

2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the Department of Education and Training approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Training for its consideration before you proceed.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education Training in any publications arising from the research.

6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study's indicative completion date.

State Government Victoria

7. If the Department of Education Training has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department's Research and Evaluation Register.

I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Youla Michaels, Project Support Officer, Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch, by [redacted]

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Susan Thomas
Director
Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch

04/02/2015

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State Government Victoria

Appendix C Research Permission – Manager, Knox City Council, Family and Children's Services Department

Civic Centre & Postal Address
511 Burwood Hwy, Wantirna South VIC 3152
e knoxcc@knox.vic.gov.au w www.knox.vic.gov.au

Knox City Council

9 April 2015

Enquiries to: Janine Brown
File Ref: D/W 3520314

Associate Professor Jane Southcott
Faculty of Education
Monash University
Cnr Wellington & Blackburn Roads
CLAYTON VIC 3800

Dear Associate Professor Southcott

Early childhood services and the facilitation of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families

Thank you for your request to recruit participants from Knox City Council Early Childhood Services for the above-named research.

I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement regarding the research project - Early childhood services and the facilitation of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families and hereby give permission for this research to be conducted.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Janine Brown
Manager Family & Children's Services

cc Wendy Roberts, Student Researcher

t 03 9298 8000 f 03 9800 3096 nrs 133 677 (quote '03 9298 8000') dx 18210 KNOX abn 24 477 480 661