Chapter 1 – Introduction

The research presented in this thesis is aimed to examine the lived experiences of early childhood families in regard to the parent-teacher relationship. The purpose was to investigate the nature of the relationship from the parental perspective and to explore the perceived roles, expectations and dynamics of the relationship. Also, to potentially offer suggestions about what skills or techniques parents believe work best within the relationship and how this may be used to support teacher training.

Over the past few decades there has been heightened attention paid to quality early childhood education and care. In the twelve months from September 2011 to 2012 there was an increase of 8% of children attending Long Day Care facilities in Australia (Early Childhood Australia, 2012). The increase in numbers attending early childhood education and care services and the creation of new facilities has led to the development of national quality standards. In Australia and the United States industry standards have been applied to childcare settings to foster the growth and development of children. In Australia, state and territory governments, with input from the early childhood sector and early childhood academics, developed the Early Years Learning Framework (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). The framework describes the principles, practices and outcomes that support and enhance the learning of children birth to five years, as well as their transition to school.   The Australian Federal Government developed the mychild.gov.au website to assist families in finding information on different types of childcare and how to get assistance with costs. Furthermore, the National Quality Framework for ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) was established in 2012 for the regulation and quality assessment of childcare and early learning services across the nation (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012).

In the United States the development of Early Head Start, a federally funded community-based program, provides low-income families with child development and family support services. In 2011 there were 52 programs running in the state of Texas with over 7500 infants and toddlers under the age of three using the program (Administration for Children and Families Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2013). The United States Federal Government's childcare.gov website provides training and technical assistance to states, territories, tribes and local communities. There is also information for families about childcare and links to local childcare finder agencies.

The increase in attention to early learning emphasises the role that parents play in their child's development and the importance of the relationship they share with other significant adults in their child's life. Early childhood researchers and educators acknowledge the importance of the parent-teacher relationship. Studies have looked at how teachers view their role within the relationship (Hedges, 2005; Hughes, 2001; Hujala, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Sumsion, 2003). However, there is a dearth of research examining the relationship from a parent's perspective.

Teachers and parents have long acknowledged the importance of the parent-teacher relationship (Keyes, 2002; Ratcliff, 2009; Rodd, 2006) and yet the significance of the relationship is not well known. Parents and teachers alike value the relationship in terms of sharing knowledge and information about the child (Hagan, 2010; Knopf, 2007; Swick, 2004) but the relationship has the potential to go well beyond just information sharing.

Current policy directions in Australia are "underpinned by an emphasis on shared responsibility, collaborative relationships and the 'participation' of all stakeholders" (Irvine, Tayler & Farrell, 2001, p. 256). The Early Years Learning Framework (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) was designed to be used in partnership with families, and quality area six of

the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority,

2012) encourages the development of collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

Keyes (2002) suggests that there are three factors involved in developing effective relationships.

These are: the matching of culture and values between teachers and parents; societal forces at

work on families and schools; and how teachers and parents view their roles. There is little

question of the value of parent-teacher relationships in terms of educational success for children.

There is still much to be learned from all aspects of the parent-teacher relationship and there is a

need for more specific research from a parent's perspective. In addition there is little research

into how parents perceive the relationship, the roles and responsibilities within the relationship

and what sorts of involvements are most beneficial to all parties.

Definition of terms

Early Childhood refers to children aged birth to eight years (Australian Bureau of

Statistics, 2008a). This review focuses on the care and education of children aged birth to eight

years provided through both formal and informal services. Formal services include centre-based

early childhood education and care such as long day care, occasional care, kindergarten,

preschools and home-based services such as family day care. Informal services include care

provided for a fee in a child's home or carer's home (Irvine, Taylor & Farrell, 2001).

Defining a partnership is challenging as it has different meanings for different situations.

A partnership may be described as "a relationship between equals; each person in a partnership is

equally valued for his or her knowledge and contributions to the relationship" (Keyser, 2006, p.

4). A partnership may mean a legal relationship where parties are contractually associated, or a

relationship in which parties have specified rights and responsibilities. The Family-School

Partnership Framework describes partnerships as "collaborative relationships and activities

involving school staff, parents and other family members of students at a school. Effective

partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect, and share responsibility for the education of

the children and young people at school" (DEEWR, 2004, p. 2). This study is interested in

discovering how parents describe the partnership.

In this study I use the terms 'parent' and 'parents'. Parents are the guardians of children,

the adults who have a vested interest in the partnership and the child's development. Parents

may also be referred to in studies as families. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008b, p. 50)

defines families as:

> 2 or more persons, one of whom is at least fifteen years of age, who are
> related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or
> fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household.

O'Donaghue suggests families include 'all the various arrangements that people make to ensure

our young people and others are nurtured and cared for' (O'Donaghue, 1993, as cited in

Macgregor, 2005, p. 2).

Some studies refer to teachers as carers, educators, teachers and or professionals. The

Australian Government's Early Years Learning Framework (Council Of Australian

Governments., 2009, p. 45) defines educators as 'early childhood practitioners who work directly

with children in early childhood settings'. In this study, because it takes place in Texas, teachers

are defined as adults who have been trained to work with and teach children. In the state of

Texas, minimum standards require teachers to be at least 18 years of age, have a high school

diploma or equivalent, and 8 hours pre-service training (Texas Department of Family and

Protective Services, 2010). Currently in Australia, 50% of teachers in a centre-based facility

must have, or be working towards, at least an approved diploma level qualification (two years

training). Others must have or be working towards certificate III level qualification (1 year

certificate) (Metcalfe, 2011). However, by January 1st 2014, the new national quality standards

will require a 4 year trained teacher to be in attendance in long day care and preschool services

for a percentage of the day. This percentage will be determined by the number of children at the

facility and the hours of operation. All family day care educators will be required to have, or be actively working towards, an approved certificate III level qualification (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012).

As most research on parent-teacher relationships has been conducted in schools the leader often refers to principals and superintendents. In an early childhood setting, leaders can refer to centre directors, head teachers, administrators, managers and authorised supervisors. In addition, 'leader' also refers to policy makers, teacher educators and advocates of early childhood education.

Coming to the Research Question

My inquiry was designed to understand and reconstruct the experiences and perspectives of parents participating in early childhood education and care centres. I wanted to uncover their expectations of the parent-teacher relationship and how they viewed their role and that of the teacher within the relationship.

As an early childhood teacher and as a parent I am interested in the opportunities for family involvement within early childhood education and care settings. I gained a Bachelor of Education in 1994 and as a young teacher I was excited about working with children. My training did not provide any course work or opportunities to work with or communicate with families. Years later in my role as a supervisor to teachers I was surprised at what I observed as a lack of partnering with parents and the apprehension teachers displayed at the parent-teacher conference. When teachers were asked to arrange a formal conference many baulked at the idea. Teachers were very comfortable with the daily communication but were hesitant to meet with parents in a conference situation. Informal conversations were common but drop-off and pick-up times meant that these conversations were short. Parents who appeared to have a greater efficacy would chat longer and ask more questions. Other parents only asked for and received

information when they felt they needed it. Events that offered parent group discussions were few and far between and this left the formal parent-teacher conference.

The relationships between a teacher and the different parents were not equal. There were favourites. This led me to question why teachers are more willing to partner with some parents and not others. How do teachers perceive and develop the relationship and how do parents perceive the partnership and their role within it? I know that my experiences and background shape my current situation.   As a teacher, supervisor and parent I need to step back from those roles and take on a researcher role. My aim was to explore the experiences and expectations of the parent-teacher relationship within an early childhood context. My initial wonderings were: How did they come to be where they are? How did they select the centre? What is their background? What is their experience of the parent-teacher relationship? How would they change it? How are they currently involved? How would/could they be more involved? What systems, programs, ideas would assist them? To what level do they want to be involved?

The centre I worked at in Houston incorporated a high focus on family involvement. The centre also offered continuity of care. I was drawn to the idea that I could work with a group of children from infancy to pre-school. To be able to work with them and their families, to teach them and to grow with them was very appealing. I had never heard of this concept in Australia but I was excited about it. My training had prepared me to work with children and I enjoyed sharing teaching ideas with colleagues and developing portfolios to share with families. After several years another company bought the centre and the continuity of care was dropped and the more traditional model of infant, toddler and pre-school rooms with teachers assigned to the room was put in place.

Working in Texas I was afforded opportunities to attend regional and national conferences and seminars. The semi-annual Houston area conferences were a wonderful opportunity to meet with other early childhood teachers, to learn and to share information about

early childhood education practices, and an experience I had not had in Australia. One seminar that changed my outlook on parent involvement was "Touchpoints". Touchpoints was developed by Dr T. Berry Brazelton as an approach to assist families and childcare providers (health care and child care) in times of significant child development. Brazelton refers to periods of developmental regression in a child followed by bursts of growth as 'touchpoints'. The Touchpoints approach empowers families. It values the parents as the experts and credits parents to trust their own experiences, knowledge and instincts (Brazelton, & Sparrow, 2006).

It was not until I had my own children that I truly appreciated the importance of the information that I, as a teacher, was providing. My perspective had changed. I was suddenly made aware of the times when I had said to the parents in my group "You can go to work now, she'll be fine". I had no idea of the struggle they were going through daily as they left their infant with me. As a teacher, and now as a parent, my communication and the involvement of parents have changed. I am more aware of the emotions and needs of parents as well as children.

As most of my early childhood experience has been in Texas, and as I am once again living in Texas, it is here where the research will be conducted. Comparing the literature from around the world with the experiences of the current participants is useful as it gives insight into the manifestations of different socio-cultural settings. By exploring the difficulties, challenges and successes of different settings we are able to highlight the areas that need support and growth as well as celebrate and share what is working well. The ultimate advantage of exploring a cross-cultural experience is sharing what the early childhood profession is doing around the world and building on the successes to promote the industry.

Review of the Literature

Relevant research literature demonstrates the importance of the parent-teacher relationship, and the roles of participants. Many parents are confused as to their role within early childhood services. Taylor, Clayton and Rowley (2004) suggest we need a greater appreciation of the reasons why parents become involved in their children's education. In Chapter 2 the literature will be reviewed in more detail. The areas highlighted in the literature review are: the importance of partnerships; learning and development; relationships and roles; and the role of parents, teachers and leaders.

Methodology and Design

This study proposes to investigate the experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship in early childhood care and education, and to uncover the expectations held by parents. The proposed research will be qualitative in nature and will use an interpretive inquiry approach to data collection and analysis. Interpretive inquiry uses thick, descriptive narratives, and seeks understanding rather than statistical data (Gallagher, 1992).

This research is set within a constructivist paradigm. In regard to ontology, constructivists maintain that realities are constructed socially and experientially, are local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual person. For the parents I will interview, their reality of the parent-teacher relationship will be dependent on their backgrounds, opportunities and experiences. No two parents will have the same reality but may share commonalities.

The methodology is hermeneutical (interpretive) and dialectical (analytical). The nature of social constructions can be evoked and refined only through interactions between the researcher and participant. As a researcher, I will assist parents to explore their experiences by

asking open-ended questions and guiding them to reflect on their conceptions of the relationship. The aim is to clarify an agreed construction that is more informed and sophisticated than previous constructs.

Summary

The roles of parents within early childhood education and care services have been up till now constructed for them, rather than deriving from research evidence about those roles. There is little question of the value of parent-teacher relationships in terms of educational success for children. There is still much to be learned from all aspects of the parent-teacher relationship and there is a need for more specific research from a parent's perspective. In addition there is little research into how parents perceive the relationship, the roles and responsibilities within the relationship and what sorts of involvements are most beneficial to all parties.   By using an interpretive inquiry approach this research aims to identify parent experiences and perceptions in regard to the parent-teacher relationship. Through the exploration and reflection of the lived experiences of parents this project seeks to partially fill the gap of information available in regard to the expectations and conceptualised meanings of the parent-teacher relationship in early childhood education and care held by parents.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In an early childhood education and care environment, the relationship between parents, teachers and leaders is seen as integral (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001b; Murray, 2008). The following summary of the literature reviewed seeks to identify the current view of partnerships from the point of view of parents, teachers and leaders. It also aims to determine the perceived importance of the partnership. The literature presented in this chapter includes research drawing upon different methodologies to study parent-teacher partnerships. The findings of the research and its relevance will be discussed.

An Overview of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood refers to children aged birth to eight years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a). This review focuses on the care and education of children aged birth to 5 years provided through both formal and informal services. Formal services include centre-based early childhood education and care such as long day care, occasional care, kindergarten, preschools and home-based services such as family day care. Informal services include care provided for a fee in a child's home or carer's home (Irvine, Tayler & Farrell, 2001). Over the past few decades an increasing proportion of Australian families have been turning to early childhood care and education as parents return to work after the birth of a child (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008a). In Australia and the United States industry standards have been applied to childcare settings to foster the growth and development of children.

Australian State and Territory Governments collaboratively developed the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as a national curriculum for children prior to school (Council of Australian Governments 2009). The framework describes principles, practices and outcomes necessary to enhance and support the learning of children birth to five years. Families are acknowledged as children's first and most influential teachers and educators are encouraged to

collaborate with families regarding curriculum decisions in order to ensure meaningful learning experiences. Developing a 'partnership' with families is highlighted as one of the five key Principles of the EYLF that underpin effective practice. The educators' guide to the EYLF indicates that it is up to educators to build an understanding of children's families and communities by acknowledging diversity; by being inclusive of family groups; and by extending the partnership to the wider community. Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families. Likewise, the National Quality Standard devotes quality area 6 to collaborative partnerships with families and communities. "Collaborative relationships with families are fundamental in achieving quality outcomes for children" (Hood, 2012, p. 4).

The EYLF notes the importance of the family partnership and suggests that teachers should work together with families to plan children's learning. As a guiding national document, the framework does not elaborate as to how teachers should involve parents, or the roles of the partnership. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2012) is an independent national authority whose role is to educate and inform the community about the importance of improving outcomes in children's education and care. ACECQA monitors and assures quality and consistency of the National Quality Framework (NQF) across Australia.

The NQF is designed to improve education and care across long day care, family day care, and preschool and kindergarten services as well as outside school hours care throughout Australia. A key aspect of the framework is the National Quality Standard. The National Quality Standard is linked to the Early Years Learning Framework and it outlines practices that support and promote children's learning whilst promoting continuous improvement in quality. Services are assessed to make sure they meet the new quality standard in seven areas - educational program and practice; children's health and safety; physical environment; staffing

arrangements; relationships with children; collaborative partnerships with families and communities; and leadership and service management. Quality Area 6 - Collaborative partnerships with families and communities - is described as being fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children and requires active communication, consultation and collaboration.

Within the United States of America, accreditation criteria for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) include twenty-eight points that cover family involvement, information sharing and understanding of families (National Association for the Education of Young Children., ND). Within the state of Texas, minimum standards require childcare centres to provide families with a policy handbook that includes procedures for parents to participate in centre operation and activities, and procedures for parents to visit the centre at any time during the hours of operation without having to secure prior approval. Some services go beyond the State minimum requirements. One such group of services is the Texas Rising Star. The Texas Rising Star (TRS) Provider Certification allows centres as well as registered family homes and licensed group day homes to voluntarily achieve TRS Provider certification. Certification recognises that the quality of care offered exceeds the State's minimum standards. The TRS assesses twenty-one criteria on parental involvement (Texas Workforce Commission., 2011).

Local and national services recognise the importance of quality standards and parental involvement in childcare. The establishment of the Head Start program in 1965 in the United States recognised the importance of early intervention. As part of the War on Poverty, Head Start is a comprehensive early childhood development program primarily serving at-risk pre-school age children with a goal to boost their school readiness. Current federal education policy assumes that the more parents are involved in their child's education, the more children will learn. The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 expects low-income parents to be informed consumers of the educational effectiveness of their child's school. Early Head Start (EHS)

began in 1995 as a response to the recommendations of the 1993 advisory committee on Head Start quality and expansion. "Early Head Start is a two-generation program that provides child and family development services to low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers" (Henderson, 2002, p. xxv). An impact study of the new Early Head Start assessed cognitive and language development, social-emotional behaviour and health from approximately 3000 families in 17 sites across the United States between July 1996 and September 1998 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). It was found that at age two years children in the program scored higher on cognitive development scales, used more words, and spoke in more complex sentences than control-group children. A growing focus area on early collaboration in the United States is a dual-generational strategy. Like Early Head Start, pilot programs are at work with a focus on creating opportunities for and addressing the needs of both children and parents. By providing high quality early childhood education and sectorial job training, along with family support services, the goal is to provide long-term economic and academic success to two generations (King, 2011).

Recent research into brain development notes the importance of the early years of a child's life as the foundation for later learning (Karoly, 1998; Lally, 2013). This increase in attention to the early years has 'emphasised the role that parents play or might play in their child's development' (Zellman & Perlman, 2006). Current research predominantly focuses on partnerships in a school setting (children aged four and up). The review highlighted the lack of, and the need for, more research into the parent-teacher partnership in early childhood years and, in particular, from a parent's perspective.

Developing strategies that support partnerships is an important role for leaders. In an early childhood setting, leaders can refer to centre directors, head teachers, administrators, management and supervisors. An early childhood leader most often refers to the centre director. Leadership is a broad term but for the purpose of this review it refers to those people who have

a position of authority and who have the power to implement policy and curriculum (Tayler,

2006; Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez & Weiss, 2009).

Importance of Partnerships

The Australian Federal Government's Family-School Partnership Framework (DEEWR,

2004) and the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) acknowledge the importance

of the parent-teacher partnership. The Family-School Partnership Framework identifies seven

dimensions as guidelines for planning parent and family participation in all its forms. These

seven dimensions are:

> Understanding of roles;
> Connecting home and school learning;
> Communicating;
> Participating;
> Collaborating beyond the school; and
> Building community and identity.

In 2008, the Australian Federal Government assisted in the establishment of the Family-

School and Community Partnerships Bureau. The Australian Council of State School

Organisations and the Australian Parents Council govern the Bureau, which has been funded by

the Australian government. The Bureau helps by providing resources to Australian schools,

families and communities in order to build collaborative, sustainable and productive

relationships. The Bureau aims to conduct an annual parent survey to find out how parents feel

about engagement with schools and how they would like to be involved and informed. In 2012,

the Bureau hosted a symposium on engaging parents and families in learning and school. It

brought together researchers, parents and educators from around the world to discuss the

partnership in theory and practice. (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2012).

Clearly there is a focus on partnerships for school age children and with a growing number of

children entering early childhood education it is important that we focus on developing strong

partnerships early in a child's life.

Relevant research literature demonstrates that the importance of the parent-teacher relationship has long been acknowledged and valued by teachers and parents (Keyes, 2002; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Rodd, 2006) and yet the importance of the relationship is not well known. Parents and teachers alike value the partnership in terms of sharing knowledge and information about the child but the relationship goes well beyond just information sharing.

Swick (1991) in a commentary of research and literature on early childhood education points out "high-quality child care not only influences children's lives positively but also strengthens the fabric of the entire family" (p. 13). According to Swick, a positive relationship results in increased involvement of children and parents in school and community activities. A supportive network was found to be invaluable in the development of parent efficacy, role identity and child bonding and nurturing. In further research, Swick (2004) concludes that it is necessary for early childhood teachers to empower parents to be more positive about their relationship with teachers. Providing parents with multiple opportunities to be involved, keeping dialogue open with parents, and having parent feedback teams to assess the progress of the relationship are three areas that early childhood professionals are encouraged to pursue.

Hughes and MacNaughton (1999, 2000) looked at how staff in early childhood education view parent knowledge and how this affects the relationship. By examining 162 items published during the 1990s that had parent involvement as the key concept, they found that problems with parent involvement arise largely from conceptions of expert knowledge verses amateur knowledge. Parental knowledge was seen by staff to be subordinate and supplementary to professional knowledge. Parental involvement was seen as different from and competing with teacher expertise. Hughes and MacNaughton believe that communication cannot improve the relationship between staff and parents where there is subordination of parental knowledge (2000, p. 247). Instead, the researchers suggest staff need to actively collaborate with parents to deconstruct this hierarchical view.

Tayler (2006) explored the constructs of parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood education in three educational contexts. Tayler found parent constructs of the partnership vary considerably across cultures and subcultures. Teachers' views of the family and the family's role within early education will influence the nature of the partnership enacted with parents.

Learning how to build a teacher-family partnership is an important aspect of teacher preparation programs. Research by Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) reviewed the position that a strong partnership with families is an integral part of early childhood programs and that teachers entering the profession are often inadequately trained. They propose that it is the responsibility of teachers to promote and nurture the partnership and the responsibility of teacher educators to develop curricula that assist teachers to foster this development.

Learning and Development

Effective partnerships give children 'the best chance for optimal growth and development' (Daniel, 2009, p. 14). In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner evaluated early childhood programs in the United States and found those with the greatest positive impact on children's development generally included parent involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Since then more studies have confirmed these findings. McNeal (1999) associated parent involvement with lower dropout rates in school. Comer (1984) noted fewer behavioural problems, and Stevenson and Baker (1987), Reynolds (1992), and Kohn and Zellman (1994) noted higher student achievement levels in students whose parents had been involved in their schooling. Daniel (2009) reviewed family involvement standards and highlights just two examples of successful collaboration when parents were invited to participate in a programming decision.

Owen, Ware and Barfoot (2000) used a quantitative study of fifty-three mothers of three-year-old children and their caregivers to examine relations of mother-caregiver communication about the child to the quality of caregiver-child and mother-child interactions. Data was

collected via interviews and questionnaires. The researchers found that more communication between mother and caregiver about the child correlated with higher quality care. Furthermore, higher levels of communication between mothers and caregivers about the child were significantly related to more sensitive and supportive caregiver-child interactions. Mothers who were engaged more with their provider in partnership behaviour were more supportive and sensitive with their children.

Zellman and Perlman (2006) cite several studies all of which concluded that parental involvement was associated with better school attendance rates, better student behaviour and higher achievement. However, the researchers suggest that involvement may increase a child's sense of his or her importance to his or her parents, which in turn may promote motivation to learn. The studies cited were predominantly conducted at the elementary, or primary, school age. Parent-teacher partnerships are just as significant in the early years from birth to age eight. Although the research suggests that Parent Child Care Involvement (PCCI) appears to be indicative of childcare provider quality, no model of assessing PCCI was adequate alone in measuring or capturing parent involvement. The researchers recommend further investigation into the role of PCCI and how to measure it reliably.

Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson and Waniganayake (2009) used a Likert-type, five-point scale questionnaire and qualitative analysis of the data to study teacher-parent partnerships in Early Childhood and Care services in five European countries. Results of the study showed that teachers differ in their approaches to partnerships and willingness to develop partnerships with parents depending on how they see their own role. Across countries they concluded that 'parent teacher partnerships and parent involvement in early childhood education and care services are central to the implementation and achievement of high quality outcomes for children' (p.60).

Early Childhood Relationships, Roles and Perspectives

The parent-teacher partnership is a relationship that grows over time for those involved. The evolution of the relationship means that the roles and responsibilities of those involved change as the relationship grows. Good relationships are needed to support the development of the child (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). The relationship begins when families are assigned to a teacher. In most cases, this will change within a year of beginning as children grow, move rooms and change teachers. In addition, the idea of continuity of care (involving the same teacher) over several years was studied by Raikes (1993) to have potential benefits for the partnership. Raikes investigated in an early care setting the role of time with a high-ability teacher on the infant-teacher attachment and found that children who spent more than one year with the same teacher showed more secure attachments as compared to those who spent less than twelve months with one teacher.

Parents, teachers and leaders have different views, expectations, perceptions and experiences of the partnership. The roles and responsibilities of the partnership members are key to its success. Parents, educators and leaders share responsibility for the partnership. Good partners, according to Swick (1991, p. 25) are 'able to see the various dimensions of a relationship and then to act to promote the well-being of everyone involved'.

As Knopf and Swick (2007) report, teaching this point of understanding is a great challenge for all participants. If the roles of potential partners, their expectations, experiences and abilities are not discussed and established early in the relationship, then the ability to reach a point of understanding is difficult. Daniel (2009, p. 14) in a commentary on family-teacher partnerships uses the term "family engagement" to encourage early childhood education professionals to blend their knowledge with that of the parents. The United States Department of Education and its partners Harvard Family Research Project, United Way Worldwide, the National PTA and SEDL have conducted a series of Webinars on family, school and community

engagement since April 2010 (Harvard Graduate School of Education). The group believe that effective family engagement is not a one-time program but rather a set of day-to-day practices, beliefs, attitudes and interactions. The initiative provides an opportunity for school districts, local and federal organisations and others with an interest in the program to learn about current best practice and new innovations.

The benefits of a successful partnership are also financial. Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez and Weiss (2009) in an examination of how six school districts across the United States were working to develop the critical components of family engagement and the implications arising for policy development, indicated significant benefits of parental involvement for children and suggested that it would cost schools US$1000 per child to achieve the same gains as an involved parent provides. Despite the importance of partnerships both financially and educationally, the roles and responsibilities remain unclear and undefinable. The researchers concluded that the perceptions of the partnership differed between parents and teachers and this had implications for early childhood leaders.

In May 2006, as a follow-up to the Australian Government's Family-School partnerships initiative, a study of both quantitative and qualitative methods (with an emphasis on qualitative) was commissioned to research the subject of family-school partnerships. Sixty-seven schools from across the country participated in an action research project to trial the draft framework. The research team concluded the study with 26 findings and 15 recommendations (Muller, 2006). All are significant in terms of developing the partnership and the researchers particularly noted the role of parents, teachers and leaders. The importance of the role of parents, teachers and leaders corresponds with the views of Keyes (2002) who notes that the parent and teacher role constructions determine how the relationship develops. Rodd (2006) also points out that where shared understanding of expectations, views and perceptions is achieved, roles become mutually supporting, reciprocal and interdependent.

With the recent guidelines for early childhood education programs highlighting relationships as important indicators of program quality, it is not surprising to find that interpersonal relationships contain many aspects. Relationships are binary in nature, develop over time and are based on a history of interactions (Elicker, 1997). It is these interactions and the role of each participant that will be explored next.

Perspectives of Parents

The National Parent Teacher Association of the United States (cited in Ratcliff and Hunt 2009, p. 496) defined parent involvement as 'the participation of parents in every facet of the education and development of children from birth to adulthood'. This definition covers a wide spectrum and can offer parents both a feeling of security but also a feeling of anxiety. Many parents are confused as to their role with early childhood services. Taylor, Clayton & Rowley (2004) suggest we need a greater appreciation of the reasons why parents become involved in their children's education. The involvement of parents is widely acknowledged as having a significant impact on the improvement of child development and educational achievement and yet there are very few studies that look at partnerships from a parent's perspective.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reviewed psychological theory and research critical to understanding why parents became involved in their children's education. The research looked at parents from elementary and secondary schools and focused on role theory. Role theory looks at how parents construct their role in regard to being involved in their child's education. The decision to become involved will be based on the parent's own ideas and experiences as well as environmental factors such as opportunities and demands. Overall it was found that parents became involved in their child's education because they (a) believed their role as a parent required involvement; (b) they had a strong efficacy for helping their child; and (c) they perceived opportunities to be involved from their child and their child's school. The

research concluded that, to successfully increase parent involvement, teachers and administrators should, at least in part, consider the parent's perspective in the process.

Giovacco and Johnson (2009) used a qualitative study to document parents' involvement in their child's education in early childhood settings. The study involved information sharing sessions with 17 families from a child care centre in a small community. Participants who volunteered to be part of the research identified themselves as being from urban areas, internationals and natives. Through semi-structured interviews families were asked to share information about their experiences, hopes and dreams. The information collected was documented and along with photographs of the families was exhibited in the centre. The findings enabled teachers at the centre to learn about the uniqueness of each family. The insights they gained allowed teachers to better support families and to create environments and learning experiences that connected home and school. The study concluded that family involvement and the development of partnerships is complex and must be inclusive of family values and priorities. Implementing such inclusive practices reiterates the findings from Tayler (2006) who concluded that the challenge for early education partnerships is demonstrating an ability to create and value diversity.

Elicker, Noppe, Noppe and Fortner-Wood (1997) conducted a quantitative study to measure the quality of parent-caregiver relationships with both the parent and caregiver. The study presented a broad picture of parents' and caregivers' mutual perceptions of their relationship. In the study 217 participants from self-selected child care centres and family based care were surveyed. The results showed that relationships were positive when overall care satisfaction was high. That is, a parent held stronger, more positive relationships with teachers when they felt their child was being well taken care of. The study also concluded that parents' and caregivers' views of the relationship often lacked congruence. The researchers noted that a shortcoming of the research to date, at least from a partnership perspective, is the lack of focus

on the mutual perceptions held by caregivers and parents.

Billman, Geddes and Hedges (2005) in a case study of beliefs and practices in early childhood education, used group focus interviews to ask three teachers and eight mothers from a kindergarten in New Zealand about parent involvement. Both parties saw parent involvement as important but the perception of role taking was different. Parents saw their role as being dominated by "domestic" duties such as cleaning and chopping fruit. The teachers' beliefs, about parent help, indicated that they were unaware of parents' perceptions.

Marcon (1999) in a study of 708 preschoolers compared teacher reports of parent involvement with levels of student achievement. Results showed that increased parent involvement and more active types of involvement, such as extended class visits and helping with a class activity, were related to positive development and mastery of skills in all subjects. Marcon also noted that single parent, low-income families were just as involved as two-parent, more affluent families.

Berthelson and Walker (2008) analysed data from a longitudinal study of Australian children. Their purpose was to investigate the nature of parental involvement in the early years of school. Data was collected when children were at age 4 and the second wave of data was collected when the children were in the first and second years of formal schooling. Teacher beliefs about parental involvement and the teachers' ability to provide involvement opportunities are critical. Support from school administration and leadership were also factors noted to be of importance in sustaining successful parental involvement. They concluded that parents were more likely to be involved in their children's education during the early years of schooling. They also noted a need for greater appreciation and understanding of the reasons why parents became involved in their children's education.

Zellman and Perlman (2006) used a quantitative research method to explore a multi-component childcare provider quality rating system. They surveyed parents, teachers, children

and administrators. The study looked at five dimensions of quality rating systems – ratios; credentials; environments; accreditation; and parent involvement. The researchers concluded that none of the measures alone were adequate in capturing parental child care involvement, but that parent involvement at a minimum should consist of a meaningful exchange of information between parents and caregivers. Overall they suggested that PCCI is a good indicator of childcare provider quality but there was a need for more research into parent involvement and that to measure information exchange is difficult short of using ethnographic methods.

Page, Nienhuys, Kapsalakis and Morda (2001) using a questionnaire, collated the responses from 279 parents from government funded kindergartens in urban and rural Victoria, Australia. The study sought to understand parent expectations of kindergarten programs for themselves and for their children. The researchers' analyses indicated that parents believed the most important gains their children made were related to socio-emotional development. The study noted that parents valued the opportunity to make friends themselves and to also gain information about and support for their children. Community spirit was a key element in what parents regarded as important for both their children and themselves.

Muller (2006) in a qualitative and quantitative study of action research into partnerships by 61 schools across Australia surveyed parents and found that large majorities felt that their involvement in their school's project had:

- led to their knowing more about the general activities going on at the school (60%);

- led to their knowing more about what their children were being taught (62%);

- been good for their children's education (69%).

Muller concluded that there is a need for parents to recognise and appreciate the power and importance of their role. Parents need to see the value of the attributes they can bring to the education process and the significance of their role as first and continuing educators.

The review of the literature has highlighted that parent involvement is a challenge for teachers and leaders. The benefits for children are positive and parental involvement can empower parents to act as advocates. When parents feel valued and accepted they speak out for children, families and services. To make the partnership successful and beneficial, teachers and leaders need to understand that their participation is critical (Berthelson &Walker, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey &Sadler, 1997).

The following Table indicates the methodology and data collection of a variety of researchers in this area since 1997.

Table 1: Overview of the research involving parents

Researcher	Key Aspects	Data Collection	Methodology
Giovacco & Johnson, 2009	Family values and priorities	Interviews	Qualitative
Berthelson & Walker, 2008	Parent involvement in children's education	Questionnaire	Longitudinal Quantitative
Muller, 2006	Importance of parental role	Questionnaire	Quantitative
Zellman & Perlman, 2006	Dimensions of quality rating systems	Questionnaire	Quantitative
Tayler, 2006	Partnership Construction	Case Studies	Qualitative
Billman, Geddes & Hedges, 2003	Parent involvement beliefs and practices	Interviews	Qualitative
Page, Nienhuys, Kapsalakis & Morda, 2001	Parent expectations	Questionnaire	Quantitative
Elicker, Noppe, Noppe, Fortner-Wood, 1997	Parent and caregiver views	Likert scale questionnaire	Quantitative
Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997	Role construction and efficacy	Psychological theory and research analysis	Qualitative and Quantitative

Perspectives of Teachers

As the people who spend most of the day with children in schools or care facilities teachers have a significant role to bring to the partnership. The Australian Scholarships Group (Australian Scholarships Group., 2009, p. 9) found that teachers described parent-teacher partnerships as 'essential, vital and critical'. In an opinion survey of award winning teachers in Australia and New Zealand, teachers acknowledged that partnerships don't always run smoothly but that it is vital to keep up the lines of communication. It is important for teachers and parents to understand the different roles and perceptions each have of the other.

Muller (2006) found that teachers play a crucial role in the partnership. Where teachers believed in the ideal of treating parents as partners, a rich partnership usually developed. The study also noted that achieving this ideal did not come naturally to all teachers. Teachers found competing demands on parents' time was a common barrier to parental involvement. Educating parents on the importance of the partnership in terms of the benefits to their child's education is an important role for schools and is particularly important to indigenous parents.

Hughes and MacNaughton (1999) examined 162 publications that had parent involvement as their key concern. Each item either reported research on parent involvement, current parent involvement programs, or how to achieve parent involvement. From the review they found that one of the challenges associated with parent involvement is the view held by teachers. Teachers may see parents as decision-makers, collaborators and/or teachers. The publications presented parents' expertise concerning young children as ranging from different to competing with staff expertise.

In 2004, Fleer used socio-cultural theory to frame and analyse a study on the perspectives of indigenous families in regard to what is important in growing up in Australia today. Six families filmed their pre-school aged children over a three-month period. At the conclusion of

data collection, families chose a piece of film that showed aspects of their child's life that represented important aspects of being an indigenous child in Australia. Although a range of cultural understandings were documented, a main outcome was that families viewed their children not as individuals but as part of an extended family or community, with a specific set of cultural beliefs. The study highlighted the need for early childhood teachers to reframe parent involvement to be inclusive of the extended family and community and cultural aspects.

In a study of teacher perceptions to the partnership, Hujala, Truja, Gaspar, Veisson and Waniganayake (2009) found that the partnership roles of teachers differ from country to country depending on whether teachers see themselves as mainly a child carer or as an early educator. The perceived differences in teachers' status were reflected in the roles of parents in the partnership. Finnish teachers had a tendency to suggest that parents leave their children's education to professionals at the centre while Norwegian teachers were least interested in taking over the educational responsibilities of parents. Instead, they encouraged parents being active in creating and supporting mutual interaction and involvement. Portuguese teachers saw themselves and parents as active in creating and supporting mutual interaction and involvement. However, they were least likely to recognise that part of their duties was to advise parents on their parenting tasks. Confusion over responsibilities and roles within the partnership can create ambiguity. If partners do not have clear roles and expectations of themselves, and do not communicate these with other members, then the partnership will not be successful.

Keyes (2002), in a review of literature related to parent-teacher partnerships, proposed a theoretical approach to enable teachers to visualise how complex the parent-teacher partnership is, and how they construct their role within the partnership depending on their focus. If they were parent focused, teachers would empower the parents and give them teaching roles. If they were school focused then there was a separation of roles and functions between home and school. Additionally, teachers who are partnership focused work co-operatively with parents,

side by side, sharing roles and responsibilities, planning and setting goals to achieve the needs of the child. As noted by Hujala et al. (2009), the difference in focus adopted by centres, and in the perceived difference in the professional status of teachers in the various countries, affected parents' roles and the way they participated in the partnership.

Alasuutari (2010) interviewed seventeen early childhood education teachers in Finland and discussed the issues and challenges regarding expertise and "expert-layperson" relationships. The study found that there were two different frames for the partnership. There was a vertical frame, where the emphasis is on the role of the teachers' expert knowledge and where there is a lack of symmetry between teacher and parent, and there was a horizontal frame, where the emphasis is on equal expertise and collaboration. The horizontal frame was more prevalent in the study however, and it was also noted that the two frames were not mutually exclusive. Alasuutari supports the idea that the interaction skills it requires to collaborate with parents should be considered as an essential part of teacher expertise and the training of early childhood teachers in Finland.

Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) undertook a qualitative study involving twenty early childhood staff at five Quality Improvement and Accreditation System accredited childcare centres in Victoria, Australia. Staff were asked about their parent communication practices, their experiences of these and their preferences within these practices. The study found staff preferred informal and verbal communication but that communication is often problematic and complex because it requires staff to reconcile their professional knowledge of the child with parents' personal beliefs. Teachers felt they were the professionals on the basis that they used knowledge and systematic theory-based models to create 'the truth' about a child. Conversely, parents claim that theirs is 'the truth' based on anecdotal knowledge and self-witness of events. Problems arose when conflict developed over whose truth is the real truth. In an earlier examination of 162 journal articles and conference papers Hughes and MacNaughton (1999)

found that early childhood staff see parental knowledge as "other" knowledge. Parental knowledge when placed next to professional knowledge was seen either as inadequate, supplementary or unimportant. Hughes and MacNaughton suggest communication cannot improve relationships where there is subordination or "othering" of parental knowledge. In order to deconstruct the current hierarchical relationship, and increase their understanding of children, teaching and learning, the authors encourage early childhood staff to reflect, discuss and seek consensus, and suggest that they should communicate with parents in professional and equitable ways about their understanding and values.

Zellman and Perlman (2006) in their study on parent child care involvement concluded that there is no consensus concerning the best ways to use the limited time that parents do spend or could spend with educators. Endsley and Minish (2006, cited in Zellman & Perlman) collected observational data on parent-teacher interactions during transitions in 16 childcare centres. They found that at the end of the day, on average, only 12 seconds were spent on parent-caregiver communication.

Tayler (2006) explored the construction of partnerships in Australia between teachers and parents in three early childhood educational contexts. Tayler found teachers' views of the family, and their professional role in a child's education, will influence the nature of the partnership enacted with the parents. One of the contexts explored was the New South Wales 'Talk to a Literacy Learner' (TTALL) project. This was developed to meet the needs of families in regard to literacy learning and to increase community awareness of literacy development. The TTALL program attempted to provide parents with insights into learning and literacy whilst developing stronger relationships between the families of the children and the schools. Parents indicated that as a result of the program they developed new knowledge and skills, their self-esteem increased, their understanding of schools improved and they became more involved. Teachers who were involved developed positive attitudes towards the parents who participated.

Teachers had a greater understanding of parents' culture and thinking and this knowledge enabled teachers to provide more sensitive teaching strategies. Overall the children whose parents participated in the program held more positive attitudes towards literacy and learning and demonstrated enhanced literacy performance. Similarly, Swick (1991) noted that parents who became involved in school-home activities were more likely to see the teacher's role in a broader perspective.

Teacher Training

Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) explored the idea that one of the most frequently mentioned barriers to family involvement was the lack of teacher preparation in the area of promoting teacher-family involvement. Teachers believed that working with parents was important but that they had received little or no training to do so, and therefore did not possess the skills and knowledge to work with parents. In a quantitative study of teacher-education universities in Illinois in the United States, Flanigan (2005) noted that none of the five participating institutions had a compulsory course specific to teacher-parent-community relationships. The New Zealand Teachers' Council (2005, cited in Hedges) included partnerships with parents as one of the professional relationships a beginning teacher must demonstrate. In Australia, the National Professional Standards for Teachers in Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary also includes "strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents" as one of its focus areas for graduate teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 11).

Hedges and Gibbs (2005) studied the experiences of two student teachers during practical experience in family homes in New Zealand. The participants acknowledged that the placement within the family allowed them opportunities to gain insights that they would not normally be privileged to receive. One participant noted that she felt more empathy towards the parents. The experience encouraged her to reflect on her own attitude and to reconsider her responses to

situations that had arisen previously.

Murray, Curran and Zellers (2008) also undertook a study of pre-service teachers. An undergraduate special education class from a mid-western university in the United States was modified to provide students with multiple opportunities for meaningful interaction with parents of children with disabilities. Pre and post interview focus groups were conducted. During the pre-interviews, students acknowledged their limitations and lack of experience of working with parents. The results suggested student dispositions changed from viewing parents as uncaring, uninvolved and unknowledgeable to valuing them as experts on their child and partners in the decision-making process. Students, too, expressed more self-confidence at the end of the study and felt that they were more experienced to work in partnership with parents. Although a small study, the researchers recommend pre-service teachers be provided with multiple opportunities to interact with parents and families. By doing so it is hoped that partnering competencies and positive dispositions towards parents and families will be developed.

Ratcliff and Hunt (2009, p. 5) suggested that teacher education programs 'must have a clearly defined set of expectations of what dispositions their pre-service candidates should have developed' upon conclusion of their studies. Due to the lack of teacher training in this regard, the role of early childhood leaders to make up the gap and promote strong partnership is a large but important task.

The literature has shown that teachers understand the importance of the parent-teacher relationship, and the level of professional development and role construct will determine the processes used to establish and maintain the relationship. With support, training and accountability measures, teachers and parents are able to develop sustaining relationships.

The following Table lists the key aspects, methodology and data collection used by a range of researchers in this area since 2002.

Table 2: Overview of the research involving teachers

Researcher	Key Aspects	Data Collection	Methodology
Alasuutari, 2010	Teacher perspective of parent-teacher partnership	Interviews	Qualitative
Hujala, Truja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake, 2009	Teacher perceptions of the partnership	Likert scale questionnaire and qualitative analysis	Qualitative and quantitative
Murray, Curran & Zellars, 2008	Pre-service preparation	Interviews	Qualitative
Muller, 2006	Importance of teacher role	Questionnaire	Qualitative and quantitative
Zellman & Perlman, 2006	Parent child care involvement	Survey	Quantitative
Flanigan, 2005	Teacher training on partnerships	Survey	Quantitative
Hedges & Gibbs, 2005	Preparation for partnership	Interviews	Qualitative
Fleer, 2004	Cultural construction of family involvement	Video observations	Qualitative
Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002	Teacher communication with parents	Interviews	Qualitative

Perspectives of Leaders

In the 1990s, management structures began to reflect a partnership approach and an acceptance that both teacher and parent are experts and both bring a different type of expertise to the partnership. Rodd (2006) argued that if the importance of family involvement is recognized at a high level (directors and administrators) then it had more credibility and value. A collaborative relationship between teacher and parent is the foundation for growth, and a starting point for improving the lives of children and families. Muller (2006) recommended that the concept of family-school partnerships be promoted widely and endorsed by all sectors of government.

One of the roles of an early childhood leader in the parent-teacher partnership is support. Both parents and teachers need assistance to understand their roles. Leaders need to know the skill levels of their teachers and provide them with the resources and support needed to develop a strong, effective partnership (Rodd, 2006). Swick (1991) suggests the nurturance of strong teacher-parent partnerships requires the supportive development of professional attributes that promote this process in teachers.

Teachers who are secure in their own personal growth are more likely to be sensitive to the individual needs of children and parents they teach. Muller (2006) found that in order to develop best practice in the creation of partnerships, the school principal is the single most important factor. School leaders needed to be willing to consult and listen, and to recognize that good ideas come from others.   Tayler (2006), in an exploration of parent-teacher partnership constructions in early childhood education, concluded that the stance of the school principal in leading effective partnerships was important to the outcomes that resulted. For best results Hill, Strummel and Fu (2005) suggested developing a collaborative policy on parent involvement with clearly defined and articulated expectations and values. Westmoreland, Lopez and Weiss (2009, p. 1) proposed that the building of partnerships requires the commitment of staff to reach out to

parents in 'meaningful ways that help them support their children's academic achievement'. Leaders needed to recognize the importance of family involvement, its role in promoting the partnership, and the need to create mechanisms to assess progress and performance (Christenson, Palan & Scullin, 2009).

Zellman and Perlman (2006) noted that efforts to promote parental involvement were not part of performance evaluations despite its perceived importance by teachers and principals. Performance reviews should ideally be conducted on three levels. Firstly, teachers needed opportunities for reflection on the partnership and their role in it, but they also required feedback from parents and directors as part of their ongoing training. Secondly, as Rodd (2006) suggested, parents should be given the opportunity to provide feedback in terms of their role and responsibilities as well as those of the teacher and even the director. The way in which parents were involved 'needs to be collaborative in nature' (Rodd, 2006, p. 231). Hedges and Gibbs (2005, p. 123) suggested that partnerships 'require continual renewal, maintenance and revisiting'. Partnership, like children's development, changes frequently and requires ongoing evaluation. Thus, program review is the third level to evaluate. Partnerships evolve over time and early childhood leaders should review their policy and forms of evaluating frequently to meet the needs of teachers and parents.

Another role for leaders is to provide ongoing training and support to teachers and parents. Daniel (2009) proposed setting up opportunities for two-way communication as this opens the possibility for new learning among adults, professionals and parents. Early childhood leaders needed to create mechanisms for smooth transition, by supporting and modelling strategies. For example, parents should be notified of staff changes, new substitute teachers or helpers before they enter the classroom. As well, teachers needed training in two-way communication to help them to develop the skills required to achieve successful two-way dialogue.

Research conducted by Raikes and Edwards (2009), Wurm (2005) and Riley, San Juan, Klinkner and Ramminger (2008) promoted parent meetings that provided opportunities for parents to get together, to talk and share experiences, and to take part in formal meetings that provided information and discussion.

Two-way communication is essential in a successful partnership. Hill, Stremmel and Fu (2005) explained that two-way communication includes allowing parents to discuss and share what they feel is important for their child and to include family culture and traditions in the learning. Intake interviews and regular parent conferences are just two ways of achieving this. Staff schedules should support communication. Where possible it is ideal to have a staff member who has been with the children most of the day on duty at the end of the day to talk with parents. Keyser (2006) goes on to suggest that teachers not only needed logistical support such as a scheduled time to meet, a place to meet and even computer access, but also administrative support in the form of adequate staffing and paid time to converse with parents.

Table 3: Overview of the research involving leaders

Researcher	Key Aspects	Data Collection	Methodology
Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez & Weiss, 2009	How schools build family engagement	Survey	Qualitative and Quantitative
Harvard Family Research Project, 2006	Family Involvement	Research Analysis	Qualitative and quantitative
Muller, 2006	Role of the school principal	Questionnaire	Qualitative and Quantitative
Tayler, 2006	Construction of Partnerships	Case Studies	Qualitative
Zellman & Perlman, 2006	Performance reviews	Questionnaire	Quantitative
Hedges & Gibbs, 2005	How teachers develop partnerships	Interviews	Qualitative

It is an important role of early childhood leaders to acknowledge and respect diversity among teachers and families. 'When families and teachers feel known and respected for who they are, they can create trusting and authentic partnerships with each other' (Keyser, 2006, p. 9). Leaders may provide resources as simple as a list of places for families to visit together on weekends – local parks, zoos, museums, libraries – or it may be more complex: job training, transportation services, and crisis support. Leaders may provide teachers with information and support services on appropriate cultures and languages and training. Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) suggested that teachers must display a willingness to learn, accept and celebrate diversity. Keyser (2006) noted that networking within the centre is helpful. Other families with similar experiences can be a great resource to teachers and parents. A network of support would enable the sharing of ideas, knowledge, skills and information between parents and teachers, parents and parents, teachers and teachers. It is the responsibility of leaders to promote the network and support teachers through the journey (Rodd, 2006).

Literature Summation

In summary, from the research conducted there is little question about the value of parent-teacher partnerships in terms of the care and education of young children. The roles and responsibilities of the partnership need to be defined and support given by leaders. There also needs to be ongoing evaluation and reconstruction of the partnership. Billman, Geddes and Hedges (2005, p.48) concluded "partnerships between parents and teachers require continual maintenance and revisiting to keep the relationship on an even keel". Any viable partnership according to Swick (1991) requires role flexibility. This is the ability 'to nurture as well as to be nurtured; to lead as well as to follow; to be supportive as well as to receive support' (p.25). The successful partnership is a challenge to all participants and requires continual renewal, monitoring and assessment. Muller's analysis of data (2006) recorded the need for principals

and teachers to acknowledge and appreciate the role of parents. Teachers, parents and leaders must all work together.

There is still much to be learned from all aspects of the parent-teacher partnership and there appears to be a need for more specific research from a parent's perspective. The literature provides guidance for teachers and leaders as to their role in the partnership. It also suggests to teachers the roles they should offer to parents, but there is a dearth of literature as to how parents themselves perceive the partnership, the roles and responsibilities within the partnership and how to best be involved. The Harvard Family Research Project (2006) suggested researchers should devote time to a longitudinal study that examines the impact of family involvement in early childhood over time. Zellman and Perlman (2006) suggested an ethnographical research method into parent involvement. In light of the current Australian Federal Government's Family Partnership Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations., 2005) there is an opportunity for further research into the working of successful partnerships and the roles and responsibilities of all those involved, particularly in the field of early childhood education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

"Qualitative Inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human
capacities: the capacity to learn." (Patton, 2002, p.1)

This study inquired into the experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship in early childhood care and education, and to uncover the expectations held by parents. By exploring the experiences of parents in relation to partnering with teachers, the study sought to identify the conceptualised meanings of partnering from a parents' perspective. The study also sought to highlight the particular impacts these experiences may have on early childhood educators when collaborating with parents. Limited research has previously focused on the relationship from a parent's perspective. This research sought to provide insights into early childhood education and care teacher-family partnerships and how parents perceive these develop and unfold. The proposed research was qualitative in nature and used an interpretive inquiry approach to data collection and analysis. Interpretive inquiry uses thick, descriptive narratives, and seeks understanding rather than statistical data (Gallagher, 1992).

Interpretive Research

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible and place the researcher within the activity being observed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research uses multiple methods that are humanistic and interactive and focus on the content. It is fundamentally interpretive.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) observe that whilst studying phenomena within their natural settings, researchers are attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. There is no pre-shaped hypothesis but rather the research is emergent.

Smith (1992, p. 100) states that, "all observations are influenced strongly by the interests, purposes and values of the researcher". It was necessary for me as the researcher to continually reflect on my position within the inquiry. It was also important that I worked holistically and did not apply classifications to another's expression. To do this I used the Forward and Backward Arc as explained by Parker and Addison (1989, cited in Ellis 1998). In interpreting the initial data (the forward arc), the researchers use their existing preconceptions, prejudices and pre-understandings to interpret and to make some initial sense. This fore-structure is unavoidable. By re-examining the data (the backward arc) for confirmation, inconsistencies or contradictions I attempted to see what was previously invisible. A researcher may often make repeated loops within the same data set. In this evaluation process I reconsidered the interpretations by re-examining the data each time with a question framed from what emerged previously. List making or charts assisted to uncover patterns or relationships. What I am concerned about is understanding. The inquiry will serve to broaden and deepen my understandings of myself as a researcher, teacher and parent, and of the participants with whom I develop a research relationship (Smith, 1992).

Whilst a survey or questionnaire like that used by Zellman and Perlman (2006) can provide general information and insight into the involvement of parents in childcare, this study favoured naturalistic ways of data collection. Generalisations "although perhaps statistically meaningful have no applicability in the individual case" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest that human behaviours cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached to the activities by the human actors. Interpretive Inquiry "investigates the process of interpretation, the communication of meaning through text, linguistic competence in conversation [and] also deals with social processes, human existence and being itself" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 6).

This research was set within a constructivist paradigm. In regards to ontology, constructivists maintain that realities are constructed socially and experientially, are local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual person. "Constructions are not more or less "true" but simply more or less informed and /or sophisticated" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). For the parents I interviewed, their reality was shaped by their circumstances and experiences. Participants came from different backgrounds and cultural settings; some were first time mothers and others had two or three children but all shared some similarities in their experiences.

The relationship between the parents and myself, and what we can discover is transactional and subjective. In order to find out how the relationship really is and how it really works I needed to develop a trusting and open relationship with the parents. It was expected that my experiences as a parent would enable me to be on equal ground, to sympathise and empathise with them. As a researcher I wanted to assist parents in exploring their experiences by asking open-ended questions and guiding them to reflect on their conceptions of the relationship. The epistemology was interactively linked.

The methodology then was hermeneutical (interpretive) and dialectical (analytical). The nature of social constructions can be evoked and refined only through interactions between and amongst the researcher and participant. The aim was to clarify an agreed construction that was more informed and sophisticated than previous constructs. Hermeneutical research may not provide a final answer to a question or a solution to a problem but rather invites further inquiry (Ellis, 1998). Any interpretation is governed by our experiences. Using the multiple voices of the participants, their various backgrounds and lived histories, it is possible to weave a complex text about parents' experiences in regards to partnering in an early childhood education and care setting. I understand that the research is an interactive process and will be shaped by my personal history, biography and background as well as that of the participants. By exploring,

interpreting and attempting to make sense of the experiences in terms of the meanings

participants bring to them the research will provide insights that potentially will help others. The

strength of an interpretive approach in this research is that in understanding how parents perceive

their role in the relationship with teachers we gain an understanding of what is required from

teachers and administrators to support this. In understanding what parents look for when

choosing a child care facility we gain insight into how to better inform parents of the services

available to meet their needs.

Recruitment Strategy

Houston, Texas is the fourth largest city in the United States. Houston's employment

base is energy-related dominant, but nearly half of all jobs are in business services, technology,

medicine, manufacturing, and aerospace. There are currently over 2.3 million people in the city

of Houston: 4.1 million in the Harris County district and approximately six million in the greater

metro area. There are over 90 languages spoken in Houston (City of Houston., 2013). As I

currently live in Texas and have had experience working in childcare in Houston it was here that

the research was conducted.

Initially a sample of parents from a long day childcare centre was to be used for the

study. Long day care refers to formal care provided for children birth to 5 years in purpose built

or converted premises, usually between 7am and 6pm. Full time or part time care is offered. A

convenience sample of six parents were to be selected and interviews conducted. The proposed

study intended to include both 1) families that begin at a centre or who have started at the centre

within a three-month period, and 2) families who have been at the centre longer than three

months. The study was interested in the developing relationships of families with children of all

ages from within the centre. Having both new and established families would provide a contrast

and may reveal changes in experiences and expectations. Due to time restrictions and lack of

interest from the centre after the letters were sent to families, a second recruitment process was introduced and this is discussed in further detail below.

For the first recruitment purposes I contacted one centre within Harris County, Houston, Texas, and invite them to participate in the study. Harris County has a population of over 4 million people and runs 26 school districts within the county. The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) lists over 3000 childcare operations within Harris County. Of these over 1300 are licensed childcare centres. A childcare centre is any operation that cares for 13 or more children under 14 years old for less than 24 hours. A licensed centre maintains minimum standards and is monitored and regulated by DFPS (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2010).

The centre selected was one that I was familiar with, was easily accessible, and was one in which I had had a previous working relationship with the director. Convenience sampling is 'the use of the most readily accessible persons or objects as subjects in a study' (Schneider, 2002, p. 260). The County was local to me and therefore easily accessible. The centre is located in an area of Houston that is predominately white with a median income twice that of Houston general. The centre is NAEYC accredited and serves children from birth to school age with full-time, part-time and occasional care.

I contacted the director and arrange a time to meet to discuss the research. Participation in the study was voluntary. Once approval from the centre director had been given, a letter of introduction to parents was to be distributed via email, explaining the project and inviting parents to participate. Parents were to be asked to complete a letter of invitation and return it via email or to the reception area at the centre. Returning the letter did not guarantee participation in the study.

As letters returned they were to be numbered according to receipt. At the conclusion of the return by date, I would randomly pick six numbers and then match these to the forms received. Selection of the six participants would be random, however, in order to obtain participants from each age range (6-weeks to 12-months, 13-24 months, 24+ months), if needed a redraw of a number would take place. If applicable, the selection of at least one participant who is new to the centre would be included. Participants would be required to complete and sign a consent form.

Contact was made with the chosen childcare centre after the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee had granted approval. I met with the assistant director and asked her to email the 'invitation to participate' letter (appendix A) to families at the centre. The email contained a link to the sign up form (appendix B) that could then be emailed directly to me avoiding a third party and potential loss of papers.

After a week, I followed up with the assistant director by offering to speak with parents at their next parent meeting but there were no responses from parents. The director, with whom I had made the initial contact and shared information about the research, was ill at the time and in hospital prior to, and during, this process. The initial letter to families at the childcare centre was printed and placed into children's cubicles instead of being emailed. This may have played some part in the lack of response to the invitation to participate but it is not possible to be certain. After two weeks and no responses from parents or contact from the assistant director I began to look into other recruitment options.

I made contact with one of my peers who had spoken with a parent about my research. This parent was interested and agreed to participate. All the documents were emailed to the parent. Another parent at my children's school informed me that she had spoken with another parent not associated with the school who was interested in participating in the research. This

process, known as snowballing, continued with other peers suggesting other participants. A letter of introduction (appendix A) and an adapted participant agreement form (appendix B2) were emailed to potential participants. Once six participants had agreed to join the research, the first interview times and locations were arranged, and interviews began in early December.

The proposed study sought to provide insight into the experiences of parents. The researcher acknowledges that the study is limited in terms of its size but that as a qualitative study the number of participants should be sufficient to provide rich data to be analysed.

Ethical Considerations

Participants would be assured of confidentiality throughout the study and would not be identified to the centre director of staff. In study outputs, participant and centre names would be changed to protect privacy and anonymity. Participation in the study was voluntary and any participant may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written consent would be obtained from all participants before the study commences. Application to undertake the study would be sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Potential problems included participant withdrawal from the study and participant withdrawing from the centre. Should a participant choose to withdraw from the study there would still be enough data from the other participants to warrant the research. Should a participant withdraw from the centre I would be interested in continuing the interviews with the participant should they be willing to do so.

Data collection methods

I had initially planned to conduct a total of 18 interviews over a period of six months. A total of six participants would each be interviewed three times. Christmas holidays and school start dates in January meant that the second interviews had to be scheduled for February and March. One participant had moved interstate during the holidays, but we were able to continue the interviews via Skype. Due to the fact that my research time had been shortened by the delays, the planned second and third interview questions were combined into one interview. This second and final interview looked at current experiences of the relationship, as well as future expectations.

Interviewing provides access to people's behaviour and experiences and thereby allows the researcher a way to understand that behaviour. The current research proposed to undertake a series of face-to-face in-depth open-ended interviews with participants over a period of six months. The six-month period allows time for participants to utilise member checking to reflect on the process and allow an opportunity to share their experiences in more detail. Participants would be interviewed at a time and place convenient to them, and each interview would be approximately sixty minutes in length.

Interviewing is planned in this inquiry to: "encourage informants to offer relevant data through a conversation with the interviewer" (Minichiello, 2004, p. 3). Through qualitative data collection a rich insight into human behaviour can be obtained. Interviews allow us to enter into another person's perspective. We are able to find out what is in and on someone else's mind and are able to yield direct quotations about that person's experiences, feelings, knowledge and opinions (Patton, 2002).

As a method of inquiry, interviews are most consistent with people's abilities to make meaning through language. By allowing participants time to reflect on their experiences, to give them an opportunity to construct a beginning, middle and an end, I am allowing them the

opportunity to make meaning of their experience. Experiences will be different for each participant and it is possible for children to move rooms and change teachers within the six-month interview period. If this were to happen it would add to the data collection as the participant would begin a new relationship with the new teacher or teachers in that new room and be able to share that experience with me.

Qualitative interviewing begins with "the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, p. 341). The data gathered in this study would be different for each participant. Questions would change over time and each new interview would build on the previous ones. Information may lead into new directions and I would aim to seek clarity and elaborations from the participants.

The strength of the interview method is that it offers opportunities to be flexible, spontaneous and responsive to individual responses and needs. Qualitative interviews are more like conversations than formal pre-determined response dialogue. In this study, the objective was phenomenological in that it sought to make the experiences of the participants understandable and intelligible.

The Participants

All participants were mothers. Participants varied from first time mothers, with an infant or toddler, to mothers with two or three children. For those participants with older, school age children, the focus was on their youngest child. Only one participant was local to the Houston area. All others were originally from interstate or overseas and had relocated to Houston for either their work or their spouse's work. The ages of the children at the beginning of the study ranged from four months to three years. For half of the participants, there was a need for childcare because of work, for the other half, the use of childcare was more for socialisation opportunities for their child.

Participant 1: Heather (pseudonym) is a first time mother with a four-month-old son. She and her husband arrived in Houston for work from overseas one year before her son was born. Heather is a teacher at a private school.

Participant 2: Lucy (pseudonym) is a stay-at-home mother. She moved to Houston two years ago from overseas with her husband's job. She has two children, a daughter who is three and attends day care and a son who is fifteen months old and stays at home with her, at the present time.

Participant 3: Wendy (pseudonym) has three children: seven-year-old twins, and a three-year-old daughter. Her twins were born prematurely at 27 weeks and have learning and developmental disabilities. Her three year old attends a day care facility that has a pre-school. Wendy moved to Houston two years ago for her husband's work, but she was able to stay with her company and also works in Houston.

Participant 4: Caitlin (pseudonym) is a first time mother of a 2-year-old daughter. Caitlin is local to Houston, and she and her husband both work. Caitlin changed jobs so that she could spend more time with her daughter. She is now expecting her second child.

Participant 5: Michelle (pseudonym) has three children, an eight-year-old daughter, a six-year-old son, and a thirty-month-old daughter. Michelle is a full time mother and moved to Houston from overseas for her husband's work.

Participant 6: Susan (pseudonym) has three children, a seven-year-old son, a six-year-old daughter, and a three-year-old son. Her older children are in primary school, and her youngest son attends the pre-school facility at the same primary school. Susan moved to Houston from overseas for her husband's job, and she teaches languages part-time at the school her children attend.

The Interview Process

Interviews were arranged with each participant at a time and place convenient to them. Before interviews began participants were asked to read and sign a consent form (appendix C). As the interviews would be audio recorded, verbal permission was sought before the commencement even though it was stated on the consent form.

Schedule of Data Collection

Interviewing provides access to people's behaviour and experiences and thereby allows the researcher a way to understand that behaviour. Through in-depth interviews the study sought to discover three things about the parent-teacher relationship: (a) the lived experiences of participants; (b) the conceptualised meanings of the relationship held by participants; and (c) the particular impacts these experiences may have on the collaborating process. The particular reasons for identifying the key questions are summarised in Tables 4 and 5.

The first interview focused on the participant's life history. The participants were asked to share as much information as possible about themselves in light of the topic up to the present time. The second interview focused on the details of the experience. Participants were asked to reconstruct details of their present experience of the relationship. A suggestion was to reconstruct a day from waking up to the time they fall asleep sharing information about interactions with administrators, teachers, other parents and the wider community. During the second interview participants were also asked to reflect on the meanings of their experiences. Seidman states "making sense or meaning requires the participant to look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation" (1991, p. 9).

In order to increase the validity of the information obtained through the interviews, each session was, with the permission of the participant, audio taped. The interview sessions were then transcribed verbatim and member checking used to confirm particular aspects of the data.

Data Analysis

The research used a longitudinal study design. Menard (2002) notes that in longitudinal research data are collected for each item for two or more distinct periods of time. The participants were the same from one period to the next, which made it possible for the data from two interviews to be analysed both within the participants' own interviews and also across all interviews.

Once data was collected the researcher used qualitative methods of analysis to uncover the assumptions and structures of the parent-teacher relationship. Babbie (2009, p. 394) describes qualitative analysis as "the non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships". Through evaluation of data the study attempted to find patterns or themes in the perceptions held by participants in regard to the parent-teacher relationship, to note similarities, differences and themes associated with the relationship experiences of those involved and to distinguish what was unique.

The use of member checking from earlier interviews also added to the data collection process as themes emerged from each round of interviews. By highlighting themes or areas of interest the researcher gained clarification from participants about their meanings.

Before beginning the interpretive inquiry it is important to acknowledge that I did not know what the interviews would reveal. I did not know if the experiences of the participants' interviewed would be at all similar to my experiences or to others within the study.

At the conclusion of each interview, and after I had departed from the participant, I jotted down any points that stood out. For example, after Heather's first interview I noted, "important to just turn up" and "not assigned to a specific teacher". Once the interviews were transcribed I read over each and noted specific ideas or points that stood out for each question. For example, from the first interview with Lucy the question "What made you choose this facility?" I wrote down "Gut – how greeted, information given, how staff interacted with children and each other." As I read through each question I highlighted the responses that stood out. I did this for each interview and then I compared the findings to see what the similarities and differences were. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) refer to this technique for systematic elicitation as *Free Lists*. Researchers interpret the frequency of an item as an indicator of it being a striking feature. The co-occurrence of items across lists may be used as a measure of its similarity.

An interpretive inquiry allowed me to open doors to the experiences of parents. After reading the transcripts and noting the major points I went back again and dove deeper into the transcripts to find more information related to these developing themes. Ellis (1998) suggests visualising the process as a series of loops in a spiral. Each spiral begins with an entry question. What one learns within the loop provides direction or reframing for the next loop. There may be consolidation of information before leading to a new question, direction or even an unexpected tack. These unexpected tacks are known as uncoverings. Whilst uncoverings may not provide a solution, they enable the researcher to refocus, redirect and reshape the problem or question in order to plan the next step of the inquiry. This was certainly true for the uncovering of how parents chose childcare and the resources available to them.

When evaluating an interpretive inquiry the emphasis is not on providing a true or false account. Instead the question is whether the inquiry can be "clarified or made more comprehensive and comprehensible" (Ellis, 1998, p. 29). At the conclusion of each stage of interviews I needed to ask myself questions such as 'What is important about this?' 'Where does

this lead?' and 'How can I investigate this further?' If I needed clarification I could ask for it at the next interview. This was not necessary in most instances. For Lucy, during the second interview I was able to ask a question related to the first interview to derive more information. "You said in the first interview you don't want the daily 'she ate this, she didn't eat that' can you explain further?" By using an interpretive inquiry approach my aim was to give voice to the experiences of parents.

"Schema analysts suggest looking for metaphors, for repetitions of words and for shifts in context" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.275). Once the major themes had been identified I created a list of key words by entering all the interviews into the Wordle program on the computer (Fenberg, 2009). The result was a word cloud of the most frequently used words in the texts. From this cloud and from the previously identified themes I could create headings for my discussion.

Limitations

This study was limited in its size and duration. It was not possible to conduct multiple interviews with more than a small sample size within a six-month period. However, the interviews were not restricted to specific questions and the participants could therefore be guided and supported to share further information by myself. A qualitative approach through the use of in-depth, open-ended interviewing techniques, allowed me to guide the interviews and ask the participants more questions in order to obtain a rich collection of data. Interviews allowed participants time to reflect on their experiences, and to share feelings, knowledge and opinions.

Investigations by more quantitative methods may have provided more statistical data but the aim of this research project was to uncover the lived experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship and to provide a voice to those experiences. The data collected was based on the human experience and may provide more compelling data than a quantitative study. Research quality is dependent upon the skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by

personal biases than a quantitative data collection method. A qualitative study, although small, allows for the subtleties and complexities of the participants, which are often missed by more standard lines of enquiry. The results cannot be generalised to the larger population because of the epistemology. However, it is expected that the data collected will provide insight into the experiences of parents and may potentially lead to new avenues of research.

The two interviews were conducted within three months of each other. It would be valuable to track the parent experiences over a full year, or longer, and explore other resources and mechanisms used to maintain the parent-teacher relationship when parents experience two or more teachers.

Methodology Summary

Qualitative research is "pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 2). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to study selected issues "in depth and detail" (Patton, 1990, p. 13). The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship and to uncover their perceived expectations.   A qualitative approach allowed me to attempt to 'make sense of, to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 5).

CHAPTER 4 – Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences of parents in regards to the parent-teacher relationship but one area that became a focus during the interviews was the challenges parents face when choosing a childcare facility. It was recognised in planning the research that the choice of centre may be relevant and that is why the question was presented. However, the importance to parents became a major issue in the data collection and, therefore, is dealt with in some detail in this analysis. The characteristics of a facility, including its location, the qualifications of teachers, and the environment, are elements parents look for when selecting a centre. Establishing a parent-teacher relationship was important for participants but they found it difficult to do so especially when dealing with other issues such as the characteristics of the facility. Through hermeneutical research this study was able to give voice to their experiences and gain insight into issues and strategies that assist in building strong parent-teacher relationships, and these are discussed in this section as well as the roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers and leaders.

Choosing a Child Care Facility

One of the biggest decisions a family has to make when either parents, or a single parent, return to work after the birth of a child, is who will care for their child. For many, the cost and location are a major factor in this decision as well as the quality of care (Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien & Roy, 2001). For all participants in this study, location was high on their requirements list. Half of the participants had children of pre-school age and the other half infant/toddler age. All six looked for a centre close to home or work and all six looked at staff interactions as part of their selection process. Participants wanted staff who were friendly and approachable with

children, other staff members and parents. Parents of pre-school age children also looked for a

curriculum or structure for their child. Infant and toddler parents were interested in the

environment more than a curriculum. None of the participants specifically mentioned parent-

teacher relationships as a search criterion. It was only after their child was enrolled and had been

at the centre for a period of two months or more did this issue arise. Other features participants

looked for in choosing their facility included staff/child ratios and teacher education and

experience. Advice from family or friends, or previous experience, may also influence a parent's

decision on where and with whom their child is cared for. Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, (1999) in a

review of research into the influences on mothers' child care choice behaviours found that most

mothers begin their research by asking people they know. Only when these sources failed to find

a provider did mothers turn to more formal sources such as referral agencies. In the current

study, participants used recommendations from friends and colleagues, previous experiences

with a national provider, and Internet searches to locate their facility. Only one participant used

a local childcare resource service to find her chosen facility and that was because she worked for

that company.

Resources

How families begin researching childcare is not well known. The resources that are

available differ from city to city, state to state, and country to country. In some countries, federal

governments offer resources, advice and financial aid to families. For example, in Australia the

mychild website (Commonwealth of Australia., 2012) provides a database of childcare centres

throughout the country as well as links to health and family support services. The idea of

integrating services is one that is recognised around the world. Irvine, Tayler and Farrell (2001)

call attention to the 2001 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD

2001, cited in Irvine, Tayler & Farrell) report on Early Childhood Education and Care "Starting

Out", and note that access to early childhood education and care has become a policy priority in

member countries. The authors go on to give examples of country policy ideas such as the British Government's funding of the development of Early Excellence Centres – facilities that promote integrated early care and education, family support and training. In the United States, schools are becoming more of a focus area for child and family services but by school age, many opportunities to establish community relationships and provide resources have already been lost. A dual generational strategy initiative is one area being promoted the Ray Marshall Center and the Foundation for Child Development (King, Smith & Glover, 2011). This approach provides quality developmental opportunities to children and their parents simultaneously. However at present few such strategies exist.

In the United States provision for childcare is fundamentally private. There is no overall national policy for families of children, and no federal oversight of children's services. Most public funds are directed to at-risk children living in poverty. Income and eligibility requirements for funding vary from state to state, and supply of places is often inadequate to meet demand (Leach, 2009). The childcare market is not well organised to inform parents of their options. The irregular arrangements for providing information often lead to parents relying on informal social networks which may be limited or biased (Lloyd & Penn, 2012). For participant Wendy, the move to Houston from Minneapolis was a challenge in terms of finding resources for her children. The previous state in which she lived offered an array of services to parents. The information came from civic groups that rated day care facilities with more transparency. Medical professions put out resource guides such as what was happening in the community that would benefit families. Wendy's paediatrician was a great resource for information. In her previous city, information on childcare was easily accessible, local schools had support groups, and childcare centres and schools worked cooperatively. Wendy's local community centre offered adult fitness classes, a health club, and swim classes for children with special needs. Wendy stated that "…coming down here was, I don't want to say it was worse, it

is just that it is not as transparent" (I1, p. 6). Wendy discovered that there were many different services offering different information, but it was not all housed in one place.

Little is known about the criteria parents use when selecting early childhood facilities for their children (Elliott, 2005). All participants in the current study had different methods for selecting a childcare facility, but Wendy and Heather used the Internet as a starting point. Finding a facility close to home or work was part of their search criteria. There is a plethora of websites available that lists what to look for in a childcare facility. A Google search will list many facilities as well as government and private sites with information and links to further information on how to best select a facility. However, for the participants in this study, the initial search was not on what to look for but location of facilities and services offered. Heather was looking for a facility close to her work and one that had a Montessori program. Wendy was searching for a facility with low teacher-child ratios, an academic focus and one that did not have any religious parameters. In the end, her choice was one that was close to her home and one that would offer her daughter opportunities for social interactions.

A recommendation from other people was a factor in the selection process for participants Lucy and Michelle. There is not a great deal of literature on the reasoning processes parents use when choosing childcare (Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien & Roy, 2001). Some studies have looked at different types of selection criteria but with conflicting results. Although parents said they were looking for quality, a lot of the time their decision came down to other practical factors (Britner & Phillips 1995 cited in Peyton et al, 2001). Regardless of how the centre was found, the "feeling" participants in this current study experienced when they entered the facility was often fundamental to their choosing to enrol their child. "Most of it was on how you felt about the school when you walked in" (Lucy, I1, p. 2). "I just had a feeling about it. … I think it's important that I feel happy" (Heather, I1, p. 2).

Overall, the idea of just turning up to view a facility was a common thread amongst participants. They felt it was important for them to see the facility in its every day routine without the possibility of the 'glossy coat' being put on for an organised tour. Heather and Michelle both used this approach and stated: "I just turned up because I think if you just turn up you see what a place is really like" (Heather, I1, p. 3). "I did pop in one day. I did have a quick look at the facility but then had to make an appointment to do the orientation" (Michelle, I1, p. 3).

Irvine, Tayler and Farrell (2001) note that there is a lack of integration between childcare and early education services. Parents support the idea of enhanced links between health, childcare and education services but there are differing views on how this integration might be achieved. Irvine et al, (2001) suggest further phenomenological research into parental engagement and participation in early childhood education and care services, in an attempt to develop a more responsive service to consumers.

Characteristics of the Facility

The desired characteristics of a childcare facility differ between families. Often what parents are looking for and what they eventually choose may differ significantly due to financial or practical factors such as location. Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien and Roy (2001) note that most studies that examine parental childcare choices have focused on demographic factors and in general, the most important factor in final selection is income. Conflicting results from studies about the process of choosing care were reported. In one listed study, health and safety were rated as the most important qualities followed by the caregiver-child relationship. In another study, the relationship was ranked first and health and safety fourth. The findings from the current study concur. Each participant described different characteristics as being important in their choice of facility.

Location

For the majority of study findings, Peyton et al. (2001) note that parents rate quality characteristics, such as relationships, educational emphasis, staff training and environment as being more important than practical characteristics such as location and cost.

In the present study, participants chose their facilities primarily on location. Houston is a very large city with long drive times and has been ranked sixth for the worst commute time in the United States (Schrank, 2012). Heather chose a centre close to her work. At the time of selection she and her husband were in the process of looking for a new home. Heather felt that as she didn't know where she would be living, and it could have been forty minutes away, being close to work would provide her with more time to spend with her son, even if that was in the car. "So that's why we focused the search around here and there isn't a great choice, well, not that I found on Google, but this one I found and I thought it's amazing" (I1, p. 3).

Caitlin chose a centre close to her home and to the doctor's office. As an infant teacher herself, Caitlin wanted a facility that took care of her daughter's basic needs and then she could provide the rest at home. "…And I felt like they were going to do that tenfold. So loving; you can feel it when you walked in the room that they really cared about the kids. The environment did not say a lot; it was OK. It was more about the teachers and the cost" (I1, p. 3). Lucy, Wendy and Michelle all chose facilities close to their homes. However, the practicalities were put aside as participants looked to other characteristics of the facility before making a final choice.

The Environment

Providing a safe, nurturing environment is essential to high quality care. NQS areas 2 and 3 cover children's health and safety and physical environment (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Health and safety issues are a concern for both parents and teachers. Routines for hand washing, nappy/diaper changes, food preparation and meal times, were

important considerations participants had for the wellbeing of children and adults. Safety and

security was a high priority for Michelle. When she toured her chosen facility, she questioned

different teachers about their fire drill procedures: "When I asked them about their 'in case of an

emergency for fires', everyone could answer, each staff member could answer because I did it

separately…and they were consistent with their answers" (I1, p. 3). Wendy would like to have

seen more information about health and cleanliness. "Communication about diseases or illnesses

that are going on in the classroom so that parents are aware; hand washing upon entering and

leaving the classroom" (Wendy, I2, p. 7).

Large size classrooms were significant to participants: "The rooms are big and open"

(Michelle, I2, p. 3), "The rooms are pretty small so I would probably make their rooms a little

larger" (Caitlin, I2, p. 9). "There's really big windows. Really, really big windows so they can

see out and there's lots of natural light coming in. It's lovely" (Heather, I1, p. 4).

Outdoor play times in the morning and afternoon were mentioned as being important to

parents. "I think it's really important to have outside play" (Heather, I2, p. 6). "It's very natural,

and there are woods that she plays in. ..They spend a lot of time outside just exploring" (Caitlin,

I2, p. 9). Allowing children the opportunity to learn both through free play and teacher led

activities was seen as being advantageous.

Health and safety issues may test the strength of the parent-teacher relationship. When

issues of illness, exclusion or accidents occur, the trust, respect and empathy parents and teachers

have developed for each other will be called upon to resolve any issues.

Ratios

Substantial research has shown a correlation between cognitive and social development

and low teacher-child ratios (Le, Perlman, Zellman & Hamilton, 2006). Le, et al. (2006) cite

several studies which have shown that children who are cared for in classrooms with smaller

ratios engage in more complex play, demonstrate stronger attachments to caregivers, distress

less, and display better receptive and expressive language skills than do children in classrooms with larger ratios.

Teacher-child ratios is rated one of the top five most important qualities parents look for when choosing a childcare facility (Peyton, et al., 2001). In the current study, ratios were also a factor in the selection of the childcare facility. Participants were accepting of the current ratios they were experiencing but would have liked even lower numbers. "I'd like to see more adults in that classroom because I just don't think that they can be getting, that they can be seeing everything that's going on all the time" (Lucy I2, p. 9). "In my ideal one [centre] they would have smaller, maybe even two or three babies to one member of staff" (Heather I2, p. 7). The smaller ratios provided more opportunities for teachers to interact with and get to know the children in their care. "Research clearly shows that the caregiver-child relationship is the single most important component of a child's experience in care" (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2010, p. 39).

Teacher education and experience

In the state of Texas, minimum standards require carers to be at least 18 years of age, to have a high school diploma or equivalent, and to have eight hours of pre-service training before they can work with children (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2010). To achieve national accreditation, through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), teachers must have a minimum Child Development Associate credential, or be working on an Associate credential or higher degree in early childhood education, child development or family studies. By 2020, NAEYC will require teachers to have a baccalaureate degree or be enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program (National Association for the Education of Young Children., ND).

Recruitment and retention of teaching staff is difficult. In the US, the average teaching assistant earns approximately $10,500 a year and the highest paid teacher earns around $18,000 a

year (Lally, 2013). According to Lally (2013), the low-status view that the profession holds is one reason for the persistent poor quality. Many view it as little more than babysitting. This is reflected in the wage rates and the lack of supplementary benefits such as health insurance and pension plans. "In many places, caregivers are paid less than locker-room attendants, bicycle repairers, and animal trainers" (Lally, 2013, p. 65).

The experience and qualifications of the staff and how the staff interacted with children and each other was important to participants in the current study.   Lucy (I1, p. 2) recounted: "One director really proudly told me that 'most of our staff have been here at least a year.' I'm moving on from here!" How long teachers had been at the facility, their age, and experience was as important as their education. For Caitlin, all the teachers at her daughter's facility had Bachelor degrees or Master's in early childhood or a similar field. Assistant teachers had to have a Child Development Associate (CDA) or be working towards it. A high level of teacher training was a key element to an ideal facility. Study participants stated: "A four year developmental degree that makes a huge difference in the language that they use...how teachers interact with students. What words are they using like 'quit running' or 'use your walking feet please' that type of thing" (Wendy I2, p. 7-8). Another key element to a facility was that teachers are engaged with children. Lucy noted: "One classroom we went to it was staffed by nothing but 18 year olds and they were all but checking their mobile phones while they were looking after your kids, and I don't want that. She doesn't need to have an education but she needs to have someone who is interested in her, not the latest Facebook update" (I1, p. 2).

Requiring teachers to be appropriately trained and providing them with a decent salary and benefits is a challenge to the early childhood industry. If teachers move into the school system or other professions, they earn more. Currently, in Australia, the Federal Government is seeking to invest $300 million to supplement wages for eligible teachers. However, this fund will only provide partial coverage to the workforce and is limited to two years. Huntsman

(2008), in a review of research into determinants of quality care, points out that the level of education of a caregiver is a better indicator of quality than ratios or group size. This may be true as participants in the study noted a difference in their relationship with four year trained teachers as opposed to less qualified teachers. However participants also associated lower ratios with their child being better cared for and given appropriate levels of attention. Zellman & Perlman (2006) in a study of multi-component childcare provider quality rating systems concluded that none of the measures alone was adequate in capturing parent involvement. Measuring childcare quality reliably is difficult and quality is often linked to a strong parent-teacher relationship.

Curriculum

"Babies depend on caregivers and the environment in which they receive care
to establish a basic wiring of the brain that prepares the brain for what is to
come" (Lally, 2013, p. 15).

A centre that supports early learning and development by providing opportunities for growth and development for infants through a curriculum was not a selection priority for parents in this study. Even with the heightened research into brain development, the information we now have on the importance of early learning does not appear to have reached the general public. This was seen through the experience of Heather: "I don't know at this age what they can teach him. They talk to him and they've taught him lots of facial expressions and things like that but when it comes to big physical developments, I feel he gets that more from babies. So I would see why the teacher needs to facilitate that and making sure that they are interacting together and that they're not just in their cribs all day, you know, and they are moving around playing together, experiencing new things and so he gets the interaction with the teacher when he's having one on one feeding time and diaper changing time" (I2, p. 4).

When Caitlin first enrolled her daughter she was looking for somewhere that would take care of her daughter's daily needs. As an infant teacher, Caitlin was able to provide at home the learning experiences her daughter may miss. "I knew what I would have to have, and then I knew what I could do and I could fill in" (I1, p. 3).

A focus on education was a selection factor primarily for participants with older children. The perception seems to be that as children age they need more social interactions and more opportunities to learn and be ready for school than they do as infants. Susan chose a facility that was part of her older children's school. It was convenient for her that all three children were on the same campus and her three-year-old son would eventually find the transition to school much easier. Lucy wasn't looking for a structured curriculum but rather a programme that offered opportunities to learn through play and engagement, "Somewhere… that understands your child not just their educational needs but their whole self" (I2, p. 9). In Wendy's case, moving from another state where the teachers in her child's facility all had four year degrees, to Houston and trying to find a centre with a sound educational focus was extremely difficult. "It has been a challenge out here. To be really blunt with you, I would pull her out if I can find another spot and I would not mind paying the extra money for it. Our primary focus is education is the most important thing" (I1, p. 3).

The benefits of quality early childhood education and care are long lasting. The period from birth to age three is critical in a child's development. The experiences of the infant and young child shape the foundation for life-long physical, mental, social and cognitive development (Lally, 2013; Swick, 1991; Zellman & Perlman, 2009). However, a focus on providing early development opportunities for children is not a regularly measured factor in childcare selection. Early childhood brain development research has been a talked about subject since the 1970s when psychologists set up laboratory experiments to cultivate an understanding of how an infant's brain develops. Today, with new technology, scientists know which parts of

the brain are responsible for specific functions and are able to observe the brain in more detail. It is now possible to track brain cell growth, the connections made between brain cells and when they are used or disused. "We now have conclusive scientific evidence that babies' brains are significantly shaped by their early experiences and environments, proving that the quality of the interactions they have with those who provide their early care can change the structure of their brains" (Schore, 2005, cited in Lally 2013, p. 18). Wendy did not understand the theory to this degree but she certainly prioritised the education in her choices of care. Her previous experience had helped her to understand her daughter's development and the challenges ahead: "It wasn't just watching her for five hours a day, it was helping her develop as a child and helping us to understand where we needed that development" (I2, p. 7).

Establishing a relationship

Building and sustaining relationships is a core aspect of child development (Daniel, 2009). The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) in an evaluation and integration of the current science of early childhood development, note that if a child develops a strong and sustaining attachment to a caregiver, they are less nervous, less fearful, have a greater self efficacy and are more competent. "From birth forward, experiences and interactions with caregivers greatly influence whether babies' brains are stimulated or stunted" (Lally, 2013, p. 42). The increase in attention to early learning highlights the important role that parents play (Zellman & Perlman, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's studies on early childhood programs found that those with greatest positive impact on children's development almost always included parent involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Developing a parent-teacher relationship is complex but the characteristics required for building and sustaining relationships with families must be nurtured. Parents in the study found it difficult to establish a relationship with their child's teacher. Most knew who the teachers in

the room were, but several participants were not informed as to whom they should contact if they had a concern or a question. In many instances there was no daily contact with the teacher as participants either dropped off or picked up at a time when the child's teacher was not there or the child was delivered to them at the classroom door or bus stop and there was no opportunity for interactions. Establishing a relationship at the earliest opportunity is an important facet of the parent-teacher partnership and a requirement of Quality Area 6.1 "Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained" (ACECQA 2012).

Gradual Enrolment

"Gradual enrolment – A strategy for adjusting to a new school situation that gives children, parents and teachers time to get to know each other and to establish mutual, reciprocal relationships." (Albrecht & Miller, 2001, p. 91)

The benefits of the establishment of a strong parent teacher relationship begin with a gradual enrolment. Quality Area 6.1.1 requires facilities to incorporate "an effective enrolment and orientation process for families" (ACECQA 2012). Parents who undertake a gradual enrolment have less difficulty adjusting to the school, and their retention is higher. Further, parents who don't have the time to spend transitioning their child may be less involved, have more complaints, and misunderstandings (Albrecht & Miller, 2001). This makes the creation of a partnership between teacher and parent more difficult. Not providing a gradual enrolment misjudges the parents' interest in their child's wellbeing. Centres that have policies and procedures in place for a gradual enrolment are providing excellent opportunities to develop strong relationships with parents.

The purpose of a gradual enrolment is to give parents, children and teachers time to get to know each other and to establish a relationship. A gradual enrolment may take place over several days, or even weeks depending on how much time a parent has, and how well all parties are feeling about the transition. Participants in the current study were asked if their facility

offered gradual enrolment and none did. Wendy insisted on a gradual enrolment for her daughter, and Caitlin did her own, as her job was flexible enough to do so. When asked if they would have welcomed a gradual enrolment, participants' responses were mixed. Susan's son had been at the facility on previous occasions as a drop in and knew what to expect. Lucy felt her daughter did not need it because she was very independent. Heather had her own gradual transition away from her son, because her mother was in town and able to care for him for the first two weeks of her returning to work. This transition made her accustomed to leaving him with someone while she worked, and it was less stressful for the first day. "I was anxious leaving him, but I don't think I was as upset as I would have been if it was just him going straight into day care and me going back to work the same day" (I1, p. 3).

Despite the research that emphasises the benefits of gradual enrolment, participants in the study had mixed ideas about it and were primarily guided by their needs and experiences. There is no one correct way to undertake a gradual enrolment. It may occur over a week, a month or even in a short pre-first-day meeting. Providing opportunities for parents to ask questions of their child's teacher and vice versa is a corner stone in the parent-teacher partnership.

Primary Teachers

Having a primary caregiver or primary teacher is a significant step in the establishment of the parent-teacher relationship (Daniel, 2009). In the current study, when asked if participants knew whom their child's primary teacher or caregiver was, most could only guess. Only two participants knew whom they should approach or contact if they had a question or concern about their child. In most cases, the teacher at the start of the day was not the teacher in the room at the end of the day. Parents could tell from the daily sheets, which teacher was most responsible for the care of their child, but they were not introduced to, nor informed of this during enrolment. Participants knew who the teachers in the room were, which was the lead and which was the

assistant, but several parents were not informed as to whom they should contact if they had a concern or question.

Providing primary teacher information to families would assist in developing a relationship both for the parents and the child. When a child knows who primarily takes care of them, they can develop a better relationship, feel more comfortable within their environment, and become confident learners (Albrecht & Miller, 2001). In Lucy's case, her daughter did not want to go to school because she had a bad experience of changing rooms and teachers. Her daughter was moved too early, and she did not know who her teacher was and ultimately felt overwhelmed, uncomfortable and lost in the classroom. When Lucy tried to solve the problem, she found that there was inconsistency with the teachers. When she spoke to the director, the information was not relayed back to the teachers. Lucy removed her daughter from the centre.

Lucy's case highlights the importance of having one person with whom you can communicate and who follows up with you on events and your child's development. This in turn creates the basis for a strong parent-teacher relationship. If possible, extending that primary teaching so that teachers can stay with the same group of children for more than one year, and perhaps even from infancy through to kindergarten, has shown great benefits to children, teachers and families, because they handle transitions together (Theilheimer, 2006). Even moving a group of children together to the next age group rather than individually, as happened in the cases of Lucy and Michelle's daughters, contributes to some continuity.

The First Day

For the participants in the study, the first day at the centre was full of emotion. Many felt guilt or anxiety at leaving their child. Caitlin, Michelle, and Susan all cried outside of the classroom. Wendy had been through the process before but still limited her daughter's time at the centre until she was more settled. Heather questioned herself as to whether or not she was a bad mother, because she didn't cry when she left her son on the first day. Lucy, also, had a

similar feeling, "I don't know if I had more mother's guilt because I should have felt more guilty [about leaving her], but I walked out of the door, I knew she would be fine, and she would get over her tears, and I got on with what I needed to do" (Lucy, I1, p. 3).

How the staff responded on the first day was very important. Greeting the child and parent was a big step in the transition process. "The staff were wonderful. They knew what they were doing, they were very supportive to both her and me" (Lucy I1, p. 3). For older children, having activities for them to become quickly involved in helped.

Feedback during, or at the end of, the first day was greatly appreciated. Michelle received a phone call within the first two hours to give her an update on her daughter's progress. Susan received a note at the end of the day to say her son had settled in well with an example of an activity he had done. A member of staff greeted Lucy with a piece of paper for her to sign and a very apologetic look, because her daughter had been bitten on her first day! Other participants did not mention any feedback on day one other than the daily chart of naps, feedings and toileting.

Establishing good communication from day one is a key step in building a strong parent-teacher relationship. A phone call, note or comment about the child's day shows parents that teachers care about the child and can open the lines of two-way communication.

The Parent-Teacher Relationship

A successful parent-teacher relationship is possibly the most challenging aspect of a teacher's job (Greenman, 1996). The roles and responsibilities of each party differ depending on parent efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), teacher status (Hujala et al, 2009), parent, and teacher, role construction (Keyes, 2002), and teachers' level of development (Rodd, 2006). Each of these factors contributes to the execution of the parent-teacher relationship.

Characteristics of a successful relationship

While the value of the parent-teacher relationship is accepted, it is not always easy to maintain. Participants in the relationship are assigned to one another, and hold different expectations and values, which may affect the relationship. Overcoming barriers to the partnership will require skills in communication, new perspectives on values and beliefs and include "an understanding that early childhood education programs serve families, not just children" (Hill, Stremnell & Fu, 2005, p. 125).

Participants in the current study were asked to share what, for them, are the characteristics of a successful parent-teacher relationship. A high focus was on the teacher's ability to know and care for the child and to be friendly and approachable. Participants felt that the teacher knowing their child as an individual, being honest, and approachable led to a comfortable, trusting relationship, which in turn made communication easier. "Knowing the child. If the teacher knows the child, then the parent knows that the teacher cares" (Heather, I2, p. 3). This concurs with the findings of Owen, Ware and Barfoot (2000) who note that higher quality care is observed when mother and caregiver report more frequent communication with each other about the child.

All participants agreed that open, casual, reciprocal communication was a key characteristic of the relationship. How the teacher communicated with the parent and the child was important. Being able to communicate on a daily basis was valued, as well as the parent being helpful to the teacher, and recognising and appreciating the job they did. "Being able to see them [the teachers] and talk to them each day" (Michelle, I2, p. 6). "Communication and then their attitude and the way they interact with their students, to me it makes the communication part so easy" (Wendy I2, p. 5).

The Role of the Parent

There is little research into how parents view their role within the parent-teacher partnership. Much of the current research comes from school age parents or from the view of teachers (Ratcliff and Hunt, 2009; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2006; Muller, 2006; Hill, Stremmel and Fu, 2005; Mapp, 2003). Keyes, (2002), suggests that how parents interact with teachers will depend upon the construct the parent holds. Parents may view their role as parent focused (they are primarily responsible for their child's educational outcomes); school focused (the teacher/school is primarily responsible for the child's educational outcomes); or partnership focused (parents and teachers work together). When asked to describe their role within the relationship, participants in the study believed that the relationship was reciprocal. The role of the parent was seen as being equal to that of the teacher. Parents felt it was important for them to show an interest in what their child was doing. To ask appropriate questions that supported their child's learning. When there was an issue they would discuss it with the teacher. "Whatever I'm expecting I'm also doing. I'm not just expecting something but I'm also practising it, because I don't want, you know, if I want her to tell me the truth, then I have to tell her the truth. I can't be hiding things" (Caitlin, I2, p. 5).

Keeping the teacher informed of illnesses or events that may affect how the child behaves at school was part of the perceived parents' role. Taking an interest in what was happening in the classroom and asking questions necessary to make sure the child was comfortable was a priority. It was also important to participants that their child was ready for the day by being fed and appropriately dressed. Parents felt that they needed to encourage feedback but not to be overbearing. "I want to build a casual relationship in the sense that I feel that they could say to me "oh, we need this". They are happy just to talk to me and it's not just in and out of the door and there's no interaction. I wouldn't like that" (Heather, I2, p. 3-4). These results concur with the findings of Page, Nienhuys, Kapsalakis and Morda (2001) who acknowledge that such

information sharing is critical in assisting teachers to create an environment that is responsive to the experiences, needs, interests and backgrounds of an individual child. Muller (2006) and Irvine (2005) suggest that factors which influence a parent's participation in early childhood education and care include a mechanism in place for parents to have a say, a sense that parents were being listened to, and provisions for feedback and progress updates.

A parent's sense of efficacy will determine how they see their role in the relationship. According to Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997), parents become involved in their child's education because they have a positive sense of efficacy, they have developed a parental role construct that includes involvement, and they perceive opportunities to be involved. Participants in the study did have a positive sense of efficacy and wanted to develop a relationship with their child's teacher. It is the challenge then for teachers and leaders to understand a parent's role construct and to provide appropriate opportunities for them to be involved.

The Role of the Teacher and Director

Teacher role construct has been well researched. Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson & Waniganayake, (2009) investigated teacher perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship in five European countries. Using a questionnaire and a qualitative analysis of the data, the researchers found that teacher roles differ from country to country depending on how teachers see their role as either a carer or an educator. As children move into school, the relationship is developed more. Overall, teachers recognised the importance of shared educational responsibilities and valued the role of parents in the relationship, but how parents were invited to participate in their child's education depended on the teachers' professional status. In the early stages of professional development teachers see children as their primary clients (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005). Tayler (2006) concurs with these findings and reports that a teacher's professional role, and the view they hold of the family, will influence the nature of the parent-teacher partnership.

Participants in the current study were asked to describe the role of the teacher and the director in regard to the relationship. Once again, the role of the teacher was seen to be the same as that of the parents. The role of the teacher was one of a facilitator of learning which included making sure that children interact with their peers in a responsible and courteous manner. Teachers should be attentive and communicate with parents about the child's development, and this should be transparent, "..So there's no covering things up or over exaggerating things either, …complete honesty really" (Heather, I2, p. 4). The role of the teacher included being friendly and approachable, being interested in the child and knowing the child, to provide information relevant to the child, and to care for and support the growth and development of the child.

The role of the centre's director was seen more as a manager. In Lucy's case, the director was the visionary of the school, and the assistant director was more the business head. For the majority of participants, the director was seen as the manager and the go to person if there was a concern about a teacher or a question about learning. "What I've done in the past with directors has been letting them know what I wanted out of the school or what I appreciated and giving them positive feedback" (Wendy, I2, p. 5). However, not all participants had a strong relationship with the director. In Caitlin's case, the director was only seen when there was an educational issue with an older child. Many parents did not even know where her office was located. Heather had a similar experience. The director was often only seen when tuition was due. The role of the director was perceived by parents as overseeing the daily operations of the business and to be a support to the teachers. If the parents had any concerns or wanted to offer feedback, both positive and negative, they would approach the director.

Parents, teachers and directors have different views, perspectives, expectations and experiences about children. The type of relationship that is developed with parents and the level of involvement appear to be determined by the level of experience and professional development a teacher holds (Rodd, 2006). Teachers and parents need assistance in understanding their roles.

"Partnerships require continual renewal, maintenance and revisiting to keep the relationship on an even keel with respect to power, knowledge and expertise" (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005, p.10).

Challenges for the Relationship

The greatest challenge participants foresaw in the relationship was making sure that their child's developmental needs were met. As children moved rooms and had new teachers, parents wanted to be sure that the teaching style was consistent and developmentally appropriate teaching was taking place. "If I felt that they weren't encouraging his physical development and his intelligence enough, because they take in so much at this age, if they are not helping him develop then they're not doing their jobs properly" (Heather, I2, p. 5).

"I can see there will be challenges when it comes to being in the bigger schools, and it is a much less casual relationship and, I don't know, I think my form of communication will need to change" (Lucy, I2, p.8).

Parent-teacher partnerships centre on the child and rely on information sharing, mutual respect, inclusiveness and a sense of community (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). Parents are often unsure about their role in the partnership (Albrecht, 1991). Parents in the current study want a teacher who relates to them, is comfortable with them and is open and forthcoming. One of the most frequently reported barriers to family involvement is the lack of teacher preparation in the area of promoting parent-teacher relationships (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

A challenge for directors is to know the level of expertise a teacher has and offer support and training to assist in the development of a strong parent-teacher relationship. A challenge for teachers is to find opportunities and avenues to communicate effectively with parents. When a shared understanding of responsibilities is achieved, the roles of parents, teachers and directors become reciprocal, mutually affirming and interdependent (Rodd, 2006).

Communication

Good communication between teachers and parents is an important aspect of an early childhood education and care facility, and contributes to the success of programs in several ways (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2001). Parent-teacher communication has been associated with higher quality care (Zellman & Perlman, 2006), and more sensitive teacher-child interactions (Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000). However, finding the right type and level of communication is difficult. Elliott (2005, p. 57) supports the need for a "carefully considered approach designed to encourage purposeful discourse with families".

Forms of Communication Sharing

Communication and information sharing come in many styles and structures. Experiences of communication types varied between centres in the current study. Information boards, daily charts and email-based communications were the most common forms of information sharing found. Susan found that her son's facility was heavily email based in terms of communication. Susan liked receiving emails, as papers would get crushed or forgotten in bags. Lucy also preferred emails for receiving information and summed up the use of emails by stating: "Because it is not time dependent. If it was a phone call then I have to be available to answer the phone at that time and it might be that something else is going on. If it's a piece of paper then it can get shoved into the bottom of her bag and never come back out again or you never know what's the important piece of paper or not. So email, for me, is just best" (I2, p. 3).

A written communication system, such as the daily sheet, is a useful tool in recording information about children and can be helpful to both parties. This is most valuable when the parents do not see the primary teacher at the end of the day but still have access to information about the child. Caitlin had an experience one day of taking home her daughter's daily sheet and reading an account of her daughter pretending to be a butterfly that day. "I thought 'Oh my gosh! I actually really loved reading this', and so the next day I went in and said 'I really do like

reading what she does during the day.' It actually made it good for conversations so, I would prefer that they could write something or tell me and that's why I try to stop in to get updates." (Caitlin, I2, p. 4). For several of the parents in the study however, a daily piece of paper was not helpful. "I'm not into that. She can tell me herself what she ate if she wanted to. I don't care how many times she went to the toilet… I know she is enjoying it [day care], because she is telling me herself." (Lucy, I2, p. 4).

Participants appreciated a simple comment from the teacher about something their child had done. This information could have come via a note, a phone call, email or by sending home a piece of work with a comment attached. Opportunities to speak face-to-face with the teacher were highly valued but were not common or, when there was a meeting, time was restricted. Providing teachers with time to communicate face-to-face with parents can be a challenge. It is not feasible to have an in-depth conversation at drop off or pick up times, as teachers are responsible for the care of other children. Being flexible in staff schedules and providing extra help so that teachers can meet with parents on their lunch breaks or offering breakfast or afternoon tea meetings, will make progress meetings more attainable (Greenman & Stonehouse, 1996). Parents are very willing to change their schedules and be accommodating about a time and place to meet when it is an important meeting such as discussing the development of their child.

Information Sharing

Arrival and departure times are often the most frantic in a typical childcare day. Parents are eager and anxious to get to work or back home and children regularly don't want a quick transition. Add to this the common situation of a changeover in staff at the end of the day and the result is parents who often leave with little or no information about their child's day. Face-to-face interactions with teachers varied from none – Lucy would leave her daughter at the classroom door as they were discouraged from entering the classroom, and Susan's son caught

the school bus – to transitioning the child to the teacher or assistant teacher in the room and sharing information with the child's teacher. "When I drop her off, there is one teacher there, but we just greet each other and sometimes we chat, but really she just sits down with her and we transition, you know, from me to her." (Caitlin, I2, p. 1). "With the staff I usually interact with them every day asking if there is enough food, if we need to bring in food. Anything from that to what are you working on today? Or I haven't got the slip, do you need help?" (Wendy, I2, p. 2).

"It's literally, we just drop him off in the morning, and the morning is literally drop the baby off and run. But in the evenings then they tell us about his day and how he's been and if he needs anything." (Heather, I2, p. 1).

Understanding the types of information that parents want goes a long way in taking out the unnecessary communication. Albrecht (1991) suggests that a good rule of thumb in the exchange of information is to give parents information only if they can use that information or do something about it. For parents in the study, snippets of information about their child's day were useful for conversations with their child or the parent could follow up with a concern the teacher may have had. "A snapshot of her day. Did she eat or not? Sleep or not? Things she was interested in that made her happy and laugh that day. Even friends that she played with." (Caitlin, I2, p.4). "How she is performing academically. How she interacts with her peers. What's going on at school and developmental feedback so I can reinforce at home." (Wendy, I2, p. 4). Page et al (2001, p. 1), state that genuine dialogue assists teachers and parents in developing an "informed and realistic picture of a child's personality, needs, interests and backgrounds".

Information sharing about child development is one area where communication between teachers and parents can occur. When parents are aware of what children are learning they are able to support the child at home (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005). Formal meetings or short messages

can assist parents in supporting their child's development. The times when parents were able to sit with teachers and discuss their child's development were highly valued in the current study. Portfolios assisted this because they tracked the child's progress through photos and pieces of work. The interviews were beneficial to parents because they offered opportunities to discuss the child – their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development; and they gave parents the opportunity to really see that the teacher knew their child. The frequency of these meetings varied from four times a year, twice a year to only once a year. Only one participant in the study was yet to experience a progress report but her son had only been at the centre for four months. In Caitlin's case, she received developmental progress meetings twice a year and also a phone call twice a year to ask if the parent had any questions or concerns.

Information about social skills or interactions with peers was an example of the sort of information participants wanted. "It would be wonderful, if in an ideal world, if every day I got an email going 'Johnny put his hand up today and chatted to three boys'." (Susan, I2, p. 7). Wendy's previous childcare experiences had helped her daughter's development but also had helped her to understand where the next development challenge was coming from and what to expect. "It wasn't just watching her for five hours a day, it was helping her develop as a child and helping us to understand where we needed that development" (I2, p. 7).

Providing feedback on children's work was another form of information sharing that parents looked for and appreciated. "So that we can see and then we can go back and show them 'Hey, look at what you did. You did a great job' or 'you know what? Let's try this B again. Do you see how you did it that way? Let's try it now this way'. It reinforces." (Wendy, I2, p. 4). When parents are aware of the learning that is taking place at the centre, they are able to support that learning with further inquiry at home. When teachers and parents know what occurs in each other's context, they can support each other and children perceive that their home and school experiences are valued (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005).

The participants in the study valued parent information meetings that discuss developmental stages for children and what parents can expect. Participants felt that offering parents opportunities to meet and talk about developmental issues, such as toilet training or biting, was beneficial to them. These opportunities not only educate the parents on what to expect and how the staff would handle the situation, but it provides a chance for parents to share their experiences, thoughts and concerns, and to give and receive support.

Participants believed that these types of meetings educated the parents as well as providing opportunities for communication.   However, the times that the meetings were set did not always suit parents. "They are always at a horrible time...the last two [my husband] has been out of town, or it's just been not convenient so I have never been to one" (Michelle, I2, p. 9). Wurm (2005) emphasises that it is necessary to be aware of parents' schedules when thinking about the level of participation and offer opportunities at different times of the day or on weekends.

Recognising that families are a part of the community and offering information about local events was helpful especially to parents of younger children, or families with only one child. Activities, such as Saturday morning story time at the local library, were good for young children, but not for families with older siblings. Participation in events such as "Drop and Shop" (an after hours care service so parents could go Christmas shopping), "Mums and Margaritas" (an opportunity for mums to get together without children), "Daddy and Daughter Dates" (where fathers can engage in activities at the centre with their daughters), and a "Cookie Exchange" (where families bake cookies and share with other families), varied, especially the after hours events, because they clashed with bedtimes or were not beneficial to families because of distance and time. Onsite events such as the cookie exchange or an international festival were thought to be good because they encourage parent involvement, and showed diversity among the children and families.

Providing opportunities for children to interact with their community during their day is a valuable part of the learning process (Obeidat, 2009). Wendy particularly appreciated her daughter being able to be visit the local library or go carolling in the local shopping centre: "I like that she was afforded opportunities to go and interact with the community and build that empathy for helping others" (Wendy, I2, p. 7). Information about extra-curricular activities the centre offered, such as ballet and gymnastics, was welcomed and parents appreciated the convenience of such activities.

Overall, participants wanted information specific to their child's day. A short anecdote or description of what they did was appreciated. Parents also understood that, for teachers, this daily information writing was difficult. "She has ten others to write it down for, but I do like just for her to tell me in person or write it down." (Caitlin I2, p. 4). These findings concur with Hedges and Lee (2005) who note that a common theme in their literature review showed that parents' value daily, informal conversations over structured or planned events.

There is not just one method for sharing information with parents. In the current study some parents liked the daily information sheet and others preferred to receive the information via email. The one method of communication that was highly valued and desired by all participants was a conversation with their child's teacher. Developing an effective communication system takes time, persistence and support. "It is critical that programs use communication practices that are sensitive to the diverse language and cultural backgrounds of the families they serve" (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark & Moodie, 2009, p. 10).

Parent Involvement

"Schools that engage families in their children's learning are tapping into a rich source of information and expertise and can help build communities" (Family-School Partnership Framework, 2008, p.3).

There is a wealth of research on the importance of parent involvement in their child's education. As stated previously, parent involvement has been linked to higher student achievement (Stevenson & Baker, 1981; and Kohn & Zellman, 1994), fewer behavioural problems (Comer, 1984), and lower drop out rates (McNeal, 1999). Hujala et al. state that parent-teacher partnerships and parent involvement in early childhood care and education services are "central to the implementation and achievement of high quality outcomes for children" (1999, p. 5).

Self Efficacy

Teacher attitudes and expectations in regard to parent involvement play a large part in how and how often parents are involved in their child's learning. "In order to encourage parent participation, teachers have to truly believe that parents have valid and worthy opinions" (Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple, 2005, p. 158). Finding opportunities for parents to be involved in ways that support their child's growth and development is a challenge for teachers (Knopf & Swick, 2007). The views dominated in the literature see parents as either teacher, collaborator or decision maker (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Keyes, 2002). Murray, Curran & Zellers (2008) and Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) propose that there is a lack of adequate teacher training in regard to the parent-teacher relationship and that this lack of training is a barrier to parent involvement. Teachers often lack skills or confidence in their ability to build a successful relationship.

Rodd (2006) and Hujala et al. (2009) note that the type of relationship and the level of parent involvement is linked to the stage of professional development the teacher holds. These findings of teacher experience and training were expressed in the experiences of participants Wendy and Michelle. When discussing how communication was different between her daughter's first teacher at the centre, and the current teacher, Wendy said, "The teacher that she did have, did have a four year degree. The teacher was great. …She would come up and she was highly organised, I would say she was more like a grade teacher. She was a lot more forth coming – 'we are learning *this* this week and can you please bring these things in if you have them around the house' – versus it is in a folder and if the folder is not sitting out on Fridays, sometimes I have to ask for it, that type of thing. What is going on now" (I1, p. 5). "You can tell. I don't know if the passion is different but you can tell a difference between the ones that don't have that accreditation and the ones that do because they seem to be definitely more on the ball in terms of talking about your child's development and what they've done" (Michelle, I2, p. 8).

Parent efficacy is important in determining how parents are involved. When parents have a strong efficacy, they have a higher commitment to the school, and if they have a lower efficacy, they tend to avoid situations (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). As an introduction to the interviews participants were asked to share some history of their own schooling and their parents' involvement. For the majority there were no formal opportunities for their parents to be involved at school. Parents attended concerts or report card evenings. Parents from the current study believed that their involvement would influence their child's development. "Now it's obviously very important to be there and to be a presence in the school. I know how much Tamara and Daniel get out of it, seeing Mummy there" (Michelle, I1, p. 2). "You have to show that you are willing to participate in their education and that means that you have to be communicating with the school. …I think my involvement will definitely impact her

development" (Lucy, I2, p. 8). "Whole heartedly. We spend a lot of time playing with him because we don't see him all week long. …We like to take him places and see things. So I think we have a big role in that definitely, more so than the teachers at this stage" (Heather, I2, p. 5). "Absolutely…I think that her seeing that we have a positive relationship encourages her to be comfortable which in turn is good for her development. You can't learn unless you are in a comfortable environment" (Caitlin, I2, p. 7). Caitlin's experience matches the findings of Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple (2005) who note that as children see their parents and teachers interact in cooperative and friendly ways, they receive the message that school is valued.

In the study when parents were informed about school policies, procedures and activities their self-efficacy was enhanced. Carlisle et al. (2005) point out that parents tend to remain less involved simply because they receive inadequate information. Information sharing on classroom happenings, activities or developmental stages was beneficial to parents as a way for them to be able to follow up either at home or at school. Each week Michelle's daughter's class would send out a newsletter stating that the following week the class would be focusing on a particular theme or letter of the alphabet. Children were asked to bring in items or books that were relevant. "She loves it when she can walk in on a Monday with a bag of things" (Michelle, I2, p. 9). This experience correlates to Swick's research (2003) that feedback enhances the lives and goals of children, parents and teachers. When parents are aware of happenings in the classroom they are better able to support the learning. When teachers are aware of occurrences at home, they have a greater insight into the life of the child, and are better able to prepare learning activities for the child.

Strong efficacy on the part of the teacher and/or parent will make a difference in the establishment and development of the relationship. Teachers and parents hold different expectations of one another. Coming to understand these expectations and establishing systems

of communication will enhance the relationship, and can be the beginning for development in parents, teachers and the services they deliver (Rodd, 2006).

Ways to Involve Parents

Greenman and Stonehouse (1996) propose a key to parent involvement is to make available a range of opportunities without the obligation. In Caitlin's facility there was a sign up sheet at the start of the year for parents to come in and read to the class or to provide snacks. Parent information sessions at the start of the year are advantageous (Wurm, 2005) but work only for facilities that operate during the academic year. Most childcare facilities operate all year round. Providing information on how to be involved at the beginning of a new learning topic, or providing ways to be involved to new families when they enrol is beneficial but ongoing communication to support learning is required. "I wish we had some newsletters and a little bit more parent education at the beginning for structuring of class and then, rather than one time of year, to get feedback, and maybe having a class email list where we're talking about, this is what we are doing this week in this class, and then, this is what we'd like for volunteering, or this is how you can help out" (Wendy, I2, p. 4). To encourage involvement in centre events, Wurm (2005) recommends documenting the meetings and events for others to see. By displaying photographs and documents, families and visitors see that participation in the facility is welcomed and valued.

Knopf and Swick (2007) note that most literature describing parent involvement strategies are "school-centric" and that early childhood educators need more specific guidance for establishing positive relationships as well as understanding of parent perceptions. From the current study, it was found that ways to be involved differed for each participant. The requests for support materials relevant to the current activities taking place at school were a simple yet

important way parents felt they could be involved. Parents enjoyed assisting with activities or fund raising events at school, and they valued any time they were able to visit and share an activity with their child. Michelle recalls: "They had a Thanksgiving luncheon and the parents would come along. The way her face lit up when she saw me, because I didn't say anything that I was coming back to have lunch, and her little face just totally lit up because her mummy was here. I got the biggest cuddle. She just wouldn't let go. And she'd look and I'd get another hug. It is, it's really nice. It's rewarding to be a part of that." (Michelle, I1, p. 2). When parents were involved, they believed their child benefitted. This belief concurs with Marcon's (1999) finding that increased active involvement by parents relates to positive development and mastery of skills by children.

Parent involvement is most significant when it is directly linked to learning (Westmoreland, 2009). The type of information shared and the regularity at which it was shared is important in the relationship but differed between parents. Parents wanted various types of information relevant to their child and the parents' role and responsibilities. Wendy was often looking for ways to be involved with her daughter's learning either through providing resources or support at home. She stated: "I would like it to be a developmental focus and be getting feedback about that and what I can do to reinforce things at home. So that it's not confusing" (I2, p. 4). Susan also appreciated information about the structure of the day and the activities her son was involved in "Because I think then, that's what they say works best for children anyway, because then we can give them pats on the back of encouragement or help them or support in the areas they need" (I2, p. 5).

Parents also held that involvement means having good communication between teachers and parents. Lucy would like information about "Activities that I need to be involved in …[and] what's expected of me" (Lucy, I2, p. 4). When communication was regular, and the information was useful and timely, parents felt they were informed and involved.

Understanding the challenges parents face each day and then providing them with involvement opportunities that parallel these challenges and not conflict with them will support the relationship (Knopf & Swick, 2007). Time management and meeting deadlines because of traffic or school start times was a common challenge for participants in the current study. Therefore asking parents to be at meetings first thing in the day often just adds pressure to their challenge. Parents spend a great deal of time handling domestic duties at home and can feel underappreciated when asked to complete the same tasks in their child's class. "I'd like to be involved that way [using my skills as a music teacher] far more than I would like to be involved in peeling potatoes or something that is a generic skill" (Lucy, I2, p. 4). Lucy's feelings correlate with the findings of Billman, Geddes & Hedges (2005). They note that parents in a pre-school class saw their roles as domestic and teachers were unaware of this. Developing an understanding of skills and experiences parents have and how they may use these as part of their involvement goes a long way in establishing strong relationships.

According to Knopf and Swick (2007) early childhood teachers are aware of the importance of establishing and maintaining a relationship with families but they find it extremely difficult to facilitate parent involvement. There is no consensus on the best ways to involve parents however, teachers play a major role in determining the level and nature of parent involvement. Teachers need guidance and support from the centre's leadership team in order to provide appropriate opportunities for parent involvement.

A collaborative relationship has benefits to all parties. Involvement may increase a child's sense of self importance to his/her parents which in turn promotes a motivation to learn (Zellman & Perlman, 2006); teachers see parents in more positive ways, and show stronger efficacy which is linked to stronger professional functioning (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002); parents gain confidence in themselves and view teachers in more positive ways

(Knopf & Swick, 2007); and ultimately parents will play a leading role in determining the recognition of early childhood teachers (Rodd, 2006).

Discussion of the Results

The aim of this study was to share the lived experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship, and to explore their conceptions of the roles within the relationship and their expectations. Several themes became apparent through the data analysis. One area that has previously been noted for future research is: Where do parents go for advice regarding looking after their children? (Harrison, 2011). The processes participants in the study used to choose their facility were thought provoking. I expected more information would have come from centre advertising, or through paediatric offices. Internet use and word-of-mouth recommendations were the most common forms of childcare searching. Ultimately the choice came down to location and a "gut feeling" and other requirements may have been overlooked, or participants felt that they could compensate for missed attributes themselves. I was genuinely surprised that there were few resources readily available to help parents in their search. Having a background in the industry I knew where to look for resources, but for participants in the study, access to information that may assist in their childcare choice was a challenge to find. Participants' experiences in choosing childcare suggest there is a lack of services available to them, and there is a lack of information about existing services.

Building a relationship with their child's teacher was important to participants. Having a casual, open, reciprocal relationship meant that they were able to communicate better and support their child and the teacher. Participants felt that it was their responsibility for initiating questions to support their child's learning as well as offering information that would assist the teacher. In return, parents expected teachers to perform the same role. The role of the teacher

included being friendly and approachable, being interested in the child and knowing the child, to provide information relevant to the child, and to care for and support the growth and development of the child. The role of the parent was seen as being equal to that of the teacher.

Establishing a person of contact is vital to the relationship. Parents need to know who it is that is responsible for the care and education of their child. In this study, half the parents did not know which teacher they should approach to discuss the care of their child. Parents cannot communicate fully when they do not see their child's primary caregiver or do not have frequent opportunities to meet with them. Primary teaching over a long period of time (more than 12 months) is not a common practice in childcare. Children are often moved when they reach a particular age, for example 12 months, 18 months or two years. A system of primary teaching establishes an environment in which teachers, parents, and children can develop meaningful, lasting relationships. Regardless of whether primary teaching is used or not, teachers still need an opportunity to develop a relationship with parents. Finding mechanisms to communicate prior to the first day, be it a phone call, intake interview or email communication, asking questions and establishing expectations will be the foundation block for the building of a successful parent-teacher relationship.

Being involved was highly valued among participants. Involvement took many forms from being informed about what activities were happening in the classroom so that parents could discuss this with their children, to actively being involved in the classroom or in fund raising events. Parents in the study who had experienced a developmental progress report highly valued them. The chance to sit down and hear about the development of their child was very important. This was an opportunity for teachers to show that they really knew the child. Parents wanted to know what their child was doing, how they were progressing developmentally for their age, what parents could expect to see next in terms of growth and development, and how they could help their child at home to support the learning. Conferences and regular communication made it

easier for parents to be involved in the relationship. When they were provided with relevant, current information, parents were in a better position to support their child and the teacher.

The parents in this study noted teachers with a two or four-year degree communicated better and used more appropriate language with children compared with teachers who had little training. Even though developing a partnership is highlighted as one of five key principles in the Early Years Learning Framework, working with parents is commonly not part of the teacher training process. Teachers need training and support to be successful partners. Leadership needs to establish expectations of teachers and provide the resources to achieve them. Parents in this study value developmental progress meetings, or learning conferences, because they offer an opportunity to discuss the child, their growth and development, with the teacher. Leadership can support teachers by providing extra coverage at pick up and drop off times so that teachers can talk with parents. Providing resource time for teachers to prepare for and conduct the progress reports will help them know that these meetings are valued, important, and beneficial to the success of the parent-teacher relationship.

The literature shows the importance of strong, positive, self-efficacy in both parents and teachers in the development of roles and responsibilities within the parent-teacher relationship. Good communication and involvement opportunities are also seen as important in the relationship. It is for these reasons that the author would recommend a longitudinal case study be conducted that involved two groups of parents and teachers. Through in-depth interviews and questionnaires, it would be valuable to explore the parent-teacher relationship at the time when the relationship first begins, and follow its progress. Group one in the study would be the control group and group two would participate in intake interviews, gradual enrolment, quarterly progress meetings, and the use of portfolios. Teachers in the second group would be given training sessions on working with parents and developing portfolios. The leadership team for both groups would also be included in the study so that their expectations, and the ways in which

they support the relationship can be tracked. The second group leaders would be given resources to assist in developing strong parent-teacher relationships. It would be interesting to track the experiences of both groups and see if the extra support and instruction given to the teachers in group two will affect the experiences of parents in regard to the parent-teacher relationship.

In Conclusion

"Communication is indeed the major way that we empower each other"
(Swick, 2003, p. 275).

Through the experiences of the six participants in this study, I discovered that although parents have different requirements and expectations of their childcare facility, all want their children to be cared for and educated as individuals. As professionals we are encouraged to treat each child as an individual and support their learning and needs, the research has reminded me that we should remember to treat their parents in the same manner.

This research has informed me of how difficult it is for parents to choose a childcare facility for their child. Word of mouth recommendations play a significant role in the decision making process, but for new families to a city, finding the information to make a well informed decision is difficult and time consuming. The research made me question why there is not a central, local organisation or website that is easily accessible, and provides all the important information a family needs to know. (The Australian Government's mychild website is a good example of what can be achieved when resources are located in one place.) If there was a support system in Houston between schools, churches, medical practices, local government, childcare centres, and community groups, all providing the same information, I believe this would be valuable. The potential to share information about services would also be advantageous to all parties.

The importance of providing opportunities for teachers to meet with parents early in the relationship was highlighted in this study. Knowing who the primary carer is and having opportunities to discuss routines, concerns and ask questions of each other at the beginning of the relationship I find to be a key aspect of the parent-teacher relationship. I was reminded of the words of a presenter at a conference I attended in Houston when she remarked to the audience "We wouldn't give our house keys to a perfect stranger and yet we ask parents to leave their child with one" (Lisa Murphy, 2005). Providing opportunities for parents to meet their child's teacher is a critical role of the leadership team. Leadership can support teachers by acknowledging the parent-teacher relationship is an important part of the program and set standards for teachers to achieve. Teachers need the guidance and support of the centre director to achieve success. Without the support of the leadership team, the relationship is doomed. It may still function but not at its highest potential. For myself, I would like to be able to develop mechanisms and procedures to assist facilities in establishing standards for their program and supporting the parent-teacher relationship.

This study has shown that parents believe a successful parent-teacher relationship is based on open, reciprocal communication. The importance of the relationship goes beyond just information sharing. Parents expect the teachers' role within the partnership to be the same as theirs, that is, to support children's growth and development in an environment that is welcoming, nurturing, clean, and safe. Parents firmly believe their involvement will influence their child's development, and that this involvement will take many different forms, from asking questions to being a participating member of the classroom. The literature shows that the benefits of parent involvement in their child's education are numerous, and that parents who become involved are more likely to see the teacher's role in a broader perspective. Communication is vital and opportunities to share information as well as the reporting, learning and accountability for parent involvement are required. Overall, it is the sharing and receiving of

communication about the children, their development and ways parents can support their

learning that is the basis of a strong parent-teacher relationship.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

School of Education
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia

Phone +61 2 6773 4221
Fax +61 2 6773 2445

education@une.edu.au
www.une.edu.au/education

INFORMATION SHEET for PARTICIPANTS

Research Project:
Partnerships in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Parent Perspective.

I wish to invite you to participate in my research exploring parent-teacher partnership experiences. The details of the study follow and I hope you will consider being involved. I am conducting this research project for my Master of Education (Hons) at the University of New England in Australia.

Aim of the Study:
The aim of this study is to increase the understanding of the experiences of parents in relation to partnering in an early childhood care and education setting. The study will seek to do this by:
1) Identifying the conceptualised meanings of partnering from a parent perspective.
2) Exploring the lived experiences of parents in relation to partnering.
3) Highlighting the particular impacts these experiences may have on early childhood educators when collaborating with parents.

Time Requirements:
 A series of 3 interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each that will be audio taped.

Interviews:
The interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to you. There will be a series of open-ended questions that allow you to explore your views and practices related to your experiences on partnerships within the centre. These interviews will be audio recorded.

If you are selected to be involved in this research, you will be invited to read the summary of the transcript from each interview so that we can discuss together emerging themes, contradictions and interpretations.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the project at any time and there will be no disadvantage if you decide not to participate or withdraw. Anonymity would be guaranteed with the use of pseudonyms in the thesis document.

It is unlikely that this research will raise any personal or upsetting issues but if it does you may wish to contact your health care professional.

The audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's office. The transcriptions will be kept in the same manner for five (5) years following thesis submission and then destroyed.

Research Process:
It is anticipated that this research will be completed by the middle of 2013. The results may also be presented at conferences or written up in journals without any identifying information.

My supervisors are Dr Rhonda Forrest of the University of New England and Dr Nicole Green of the University of Southern Queensland. Dr Forrest may be contacted by email at rforrest@une.edu.au or by phone on +61 2 6773 3830. Dr Green may be contacted by email at Nicole.Green@usq.edu.au or by phone +61 7 4631 2809. Dr Kay Albrecht is my mentor here in Houston and she may be contacted on 832 717 5349 if you have any questions regarding my research.

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No. HE12-176. Valid to October 2, 2013).

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer Mrs. Jo-Ann Sozou.
Research Services
University of New England
Armidale, NSW 2351.
Telephone: (02) 6773 3449 Facsimile (02) 6773 3543
Email: ethics@une.edu.au

If you wish to be considered to participate in this study please complete the attached form and return it via email to mbanks5@une.edu.au

Regards

Margaret Banks

Appendix B

School of Education
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia

Phone +61 2 6773 4221
Fax +61 2 6773 2445

education@une.edu.au
www.une.edu.au/education

Invitation to Participate

Please complete the form below and return it either via email to
mbanks5@une.edu.au or leave it at the front desk of your child's care facility.
Please note that completing this form **does not** mean that you have been
accepted to participate. Participants will be randomly selected and everyone
who returns the form will receive a $5 Star Bucks gift card.
Forms should be returned by 5pm on September 28, 2012.
Information collected will be seen only by the researcher
and not shared with others.

Name

Address

City   **Zip code**

Telephone   **Alternate contact number**

Email

Marital status   ☐ married   ☐ single   ☐ divorced

Children's names   Age

                                        Choose age

                                        Choose age

                                        Choose age

How long has your child attended the center?   choose option

Annual household income
    ☐ $30,000 or less   ☐ $31-$80,000   ☐ over $80,000

Appendix B2

Invitation to Participate

Please complete the form below and return it via email to
mbanks5@une.edu.au.
Please note that completing this form **does not** mean that you have been
accepted to participate. Participants will be randomly selected and everyone
who returns the form will receive a $5 Star Bucks gift card.

Information collected will be seen only by the researcher
and not shared with others.

Name

Address

City   **Zip code**

Telephone   **Alternate contact number**

Email

Marital status   ☐ married   ☐ single   ☐ divorced

Children's names   Age
                                        Choose age
                                        Choose age
                                        Choose age

How long has your child attended the center?   choose option

Annual household income
    ☐ $30,000 or less   ☐ $31-$80,000   ☐ over $80,000

Appendix C

Consent Form for Participants

Research Project:
Partnerships in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Parent Perspective.

I.. have read the
information contained in the Information Sheet for Participants
and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.   Yes/No

I agree to participate in this research, realizing that I may withdraw
at any time without penalty.   Yes/No

I agree to participate in three interviews.   Yes/No

I agree to have the three interviews audiotape recorded and
transcribed.   Yes/No

I would like to receive a copy of the transcription of the interviews.   Yes/No

I understand that the results of this research will be used in scholarly
and professional publications and presentations, and as Margaret Banks'
Master of Education with Honours thesis at the University of New England.   Yes/No

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published
using a pseudonym.   Yes/No

I understand that my identity will remain confidential and all the
information provided will be treated anonymously.   Yes/No

I am older than 18 years of age.   Yes/No

....
       Participant   Date

....
       Researcher   Date

Tables

Table 4

Key First Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself; family, work, interests.	This question aims to discover the background of the participant.
Tell me about your education history. Did you enjoy school?	This question aims to discover the schooling experience of the participant.
Were there opportunities for families to be involved in your school? If so, what were they?	This question aims to discover the participation opportunities offered during participants schooling.
Were your parents involved in your education? If so how? If not, do you know why not?	This question aims to highlight the involvement of the participant's family.
What processes were involved in your choice of childcare? What help/access did you have to choosing?	This question aims to highlight the time and processes involved in choosing childcare.
What made you decide to choose this facility?	This question aims to highlight the ultimate requirements of the participant for choosing the facility.
Describe your first day at the centre. Did you have an introduction period?	This question aims to highlight the first day experiences of the participant.
How did you feel on the first day? What, if anything, made you comfortable/relaxed/confident to leave your child? What, if anything, would have made the transition better/easier?	This question aims to offer an opportunity to reflect of the experience.

Table 5

Key Second Interview Questions

Interview would begin with member checking and an opportunity to discuss emerging themes or areas of interest	
Describe for me a typical day for you from waking up to bedtime.	This question aims to discover a typical routine for the participant and to highlight the challenges of their day.
Describe for me the different interactions you have with staff or other parents at the centre each day.	This question aims to discover with whom the parent interacts with and what these interactions entail.
What types of communication does the centre offer?	This question is to gauge current communication opportunities offered by the facility. Newsletter? Parent information board? What information is on these?
How do you access information about your child and/or child development?	This question aims to discover the different methods the participants find helpful – staff, friends, meetings, internet
What, for you, are the best forms of receiving communication about your child and your child's development?	This question aims to discover if there are other ways of receiving communication that are not currently offered.
What, for you, are the best resources of information about your child?	This question aims to highlight the most used sources of information -Centre, friends, other parents, internet, centre offered meetings
What types of information do you want?	This questions aims to discover the communication needs of the parent -Daily, developmentally, community information, happenings at the centre
Would you like to be involved at the centre? If so, how/what is best for you?	This questions aims to discover if and how parents want to be involved -Donate resources, lunch dates, special events/parades, busy bee day.
Based on your experiences, what, for you, are the characteristics of a successful parent-teacher relationship?	This question aims to discover the characteristics participants' desire in a relationship.

How would you describe your role within the relationship?	This question aims to discover the viewed responsibilities of participants.
How would you describe the roles of the teacher/parent/director within the relationship?	This question aims to discover the perceived responsibilities of the other parties involved in the relationship.
What challenges do you see ahead for the relationship?	This question aims to highlight the expectations of the relationship in the future.
Do you believe your involvement will influence your child's development?	This question aims to discover the perceived importance and benefits of the relationship.
What services currently offered/included in the relationship do you find necessary or unnecessary? What services would you like to see?	This question aims to discover the perceived importance of services offered to parents within their local community, it also seeks to find what resources both local and digital are available for parents. Community events; movie/gym night; pairing with local school events; parent information meetings: infants-feeding/sleeping Toddlers – biting/ toilet training Pre-schoolers – development/school readiness
If a home visit early in your time at the centre had been offered, would you have welcomed it?	This question aims to discover the perceived importance of home visits in light of current research into its use.
Describe for me your ideal child care centre, the staff and daily happenings	This question aims to discover that parents would like to see in their ideal situation.