Introduction

The relationships that children form in their early years contribute significantly to their ongoing social and emotional development, and of these relationships, the parent–child relationship is the most vital and influential (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016; Yates, 2011). Supporting parent–child relationships and their interactions is critical for children’s social and emotional development was sought. Educators reported the importance of parent–child relationships, yet were hesitant to engage with parents. Educators’ knowledge was primarily implicit—drawing on observations and practical experiences to build their knowledge of relationships and social and emotional development—which contributed to reluctance in sharing their knowledge with parents. Educators requested theoretical, evidence-based approaches to build further knowledge and inform everyday practices in supporting parent–child relationships. These findings are critical to the development of an educator-led parent–child relationship program for use within education and care settings.

Educator relationships and partnering with families

Educators working within ECEC settings have the capacity to establish long-term, stable relationships with children who are in their care for extended periods of time, and can be key figures in children’s relationships within ECEC settings (Huston, Bobbitt & Bentley, 2015). In addition to establishing relationships with children, educators are encouraged to build partnerships with parents using cooperative and collaborative approaches, focusing on relational factors (the quality and nature of relationships and interactions), which have been found to promote positive social and emotional outcomes for children (Fenech, 2013; Lang, Tolbert, Schoppe-Sullivan & Bonomi, 2016;
Educators’ knowledge and reflection

In Australia, educators build their professional knowledge of children’s learning and development through exposure to multiple theoretical paradigms (e.g. cognitivist, behaviourist, humanistic, psychodynamic) during completion of early education training courses. Drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives informs educators’ practices and enables them to reflect from a more informed perspective about their practices (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Nolan & Raban, 2016). However, as educators spend more time establishing everyday practices, they are less conscious of their theoretical learning, instead utilising practices they have found to be useful. Therefore, educator knowledge becomes more reliant on automatic practices (practices lacking in thinking and reflection) and their work may have weak or missing connections to theory (Nolan & Raban, 2016). Reflective thought has been suggested as an opportunity for educators to gain deeper understanding of experiences and beliefs, and generate linkages between practices and theory (Pitsoe & Maia, 2012; Risko, Vukelich, & Roskos, 2002). Encouraging educators to engage in reflective practices designed to elicit answers of where knowledge comes from, what influences knowledge and what experiences have shaped knowledge and practice may enable educators to re-acquaint themselves with theoretical perspectives and help them to understand the theoretical perspectives that underpin their everyday practices (Nolan & Raban, 2016). Empowering educators by building their knowledge of parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development, through reflection, may be a catalyst for educators to feel more confident in sharing their knowledge and practices with parents and promote parent–child relationships.

In order to inform development of an ECEC intervention to promote parent–child relationships, an understanding of educators’ knowledge and current practices is required. Therefore, the overall aim of this study was to explore educators’ knowledge of, and role in, fostering parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. The following research questions were posed to address this aim:

1. What do educators know about parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development?
2. What is the educator’s role in fostering parent–child relationships?
3. What support do educators require to foster and nurture parent–child relationships?

Research design and methods

A focus group methodology was utilised for the current study as it sought to elicit educators’ perspectives of: (a) children’s social and emotional development; (b) parent–child relationships; and (c) supporting and fostering parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. This descriptive qualitative study used semi-structured questions within focus group settings to encourage and promote discussion between educators to explore their knowledge and everyday practices in supporting parent–child relationships. Ethics approval for this study was received from Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) 2016-025.
and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) 2016_002955. Centre directors and educators received Plain Language Statements detailing the purpose of the study and participant engagement procedures. Written informed consent was received from participating early learning centre (ELC) directors and educators prior to the focus groups being conducted. The average focus group discussion duration was 60 minutes (range 22–90 minutes) and all focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The structure of the discussions involved an introductory statement on each topic, a broad question and more targeted questions, if needed, in order to ascertain educators’ knowledge, understanding and perspectives (see Appendix A).

Participants
Focus group participants were recruited from a large early childhood education and care provider. Thirteen ELC directors attended an information session that introduced the topics of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships, and centres were invited to participate in future focus groups. Six centre directors nominated their service and also invited their educators to participate in the focus group sessions. The first author conducted ten focus groups at the educators’ ELC, with two to three educators participating in each focus group session. One larger focus group was conducted with six educators; overall 28 educators participated. All educators provided demographic data (93% female; 50% aged between 26 and 40 years, 39% aged over 40 years and 11% aged between 18 and 25 years). The majority (82%) were educators holding a diploma or certificate qualification with more than seven years’ experience working full time in long day care ECEC settings (see Table 1).

Analysis
The data was analysed in order to gain a contextual understanding of the educators’ perspectives. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the data as a means of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns from within the data; this methodology ensured that the themes were strongly linked to the data and not driven from a theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) five stages of inductive thematic analysis: (1) Becoming familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Refining; and (5) Defining and naming themes. In order to provide an accurate account of educators’ perspectives, the research team crosschecked the identified themes ensuring a consensus was reached.

Findings
Findings are presented within the following themes: (1) Educators’ knowledge; (2) Influences on educators’ knowledge; (3) Educators’ role; and (4) Gaining knowledge.

1. Educators’ knowledge
Educators readily shared their perceptions of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. They identified the influences on children’s development, social and emotional skills and strategies used to support children’s social and emotional development. Family, educational and cultural environments were recognised as important settings where children could feel safe and supported through consistent approaches.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>26–40</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Certificate III</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience in ECEC</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0–3 years</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>7–9 years</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long day care</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten and long day care</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III educator</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma educator</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/group leader</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education/pedagogical leader</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Building trusting relationships and family connections were seen as particularly important for children’s social and emotional development as noted by one educator:

“I think it comes back to those relationships and that’s what it’s all about” (Educator 07).

Educators easily identified children’s social and emotional skills and provided many examples of how these are displayed in ECEC settings, including: children’s resilience; ability to control emotions; show empathy; create, work in, join and withdraw from peer groups; share; co-operate; and form attachments and relationships. Two educators acknowledged that children’s social and emotional development varies and is different depending on the age of the child. Many educators discussed caring for emotionally upset children who have difficulty separating from their parent and settling into ECEC. They recognised that making the children feel comfortable and providing support, love and reassurance contributes to building the children’s emotional competence and resilience. The following quote is representative of the findings:

“From parents and separation in the morning, some children need to be introduced to the change. They rely on you being there … it’s the emotional re-assurance saying goodbye to the parent. For me, I ask them when I come in: ‘Did you have a good morning?’ You have to help them build that emotional competence and the resilience to change” (Educator 16).

It was widely acknowledged by the educators that parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development are critical for children’s overall wellbeing and development. Developing social and emotional skills early in life was seen as an important part of children growing up and connecting with others. A number of educators stated that social and emotional development is the most critical aspect of development because it is the key to ongoing learning and affects all other areas of children’s development and learning, as highlighted in the following quote:

“It is the most important aspect of being human … emotional and social development, I believe personally, [is] the foundation of their whole life … If we don’t get that right, it’s not right. It affects all the other development and learning” (Educator 05).

Educators unanimously agreed that the parent–child relationship is the most important relationship for a child, as reflected by the following educator’s comment:

“It is the most vital thing. I’d say, in anything. You are constantly looking up to your parent[s], they teach you constantly. They feel how you feel; you feel how they feel. You hope it’s a strong bond and a strong relationship” (Educator 02).

When questioned further about the influence of parent–child relationships on children’s social and emotional development, educators revealed different depths of knowledge: a basic understanding (naming or labelling children’s social and emotional skills) or an advanced understanding and interpretation (engaging in in-depth conversations about children’s development, providing examples of children’s social and emotional skills and the impact of development on children’s outcomes). Most educators were able to identify, at a basic level, that parent–child relationships influence children’s social and emotional development and the elements of functional and dysfunctional relationships.

A smaller number of educators showed a more advanced understanding of the influence of the parent–child relationships on children’s social and emotional development, as described in their detailed accounts of children’s behaviours and outcomes. These educators noted that children with poor parent–child relationships tended to be less socially and emotionally stable; the children were more likely to be outwardly emotional, upset, angry, violent, aggressive, destructive, less communicative and not as engaged in learning compared to children with positive parent–child relationships. An educator noted that if there is a poor bond, such as a lack of warmth and attention from the parent, then the child might seek emotional support from other caregivers. The following educator identified an ‘unstable’ parent–child relationship and the impact this had on the child’s social and emotional skills:

“I have seen [that] when a child has not been in a stable relationship with mum/dad or extended family, [he/she] is then very withdrawn, [holds] inappropriate conversations with peers, [or ends up being] excluded because [he/she looks] un-showered or looks untidy. Things like that create a life stigma” (Educator 07).

2. Influences on educators’ knowledge

Educators discussed the many ways in which their knowledge of social and emotional development and parent–child relationships is influenced: (a) practice/experiential knowledge; (b) theoretical knowledge; and (c) self-knowledge.

a. Practice/experiential knowledge

This included observing and having conversations with parents and children, and was identified by the educators as one of the major influences on their knowledge. Educators reported spending time with children, watching the formation of friendships and interactions between children and between parent and child, and observing children’s social and emotional behaviours. The majority of educators reported that they observed the parent–child interaction (discipline, warmth, responsiveness and tone) and relationship (attachment) when parents were dropping their children off and picking them up at the ELC. The following quote is representative of this within the data:

“They drop off and they pick up [their children], you might not say much but you will always observe as an educator” (Educator 08).
Conversations with parents and children provide educators with an opportunity to learn more about the child and family as a whole. Discussions with parents enabled educators to understand the bond and relationship between the parent and child. However, not all parents were open to sharing.

A number of educators discussed the importance of knowing the families, parents and children who attend their centre. They recognise the impact this has on their knowledge and, consequently, understanding of the interactions between parents and children and children’s social and emotional development—as seen in the following comment:

“It’s about knowing your parents; what they are like at home, getting an understanding of what they are like with their child and then knowing how that works, so that you know what to do” (Educator 05).

b. Theoretical knowledge

Educators recognised theoretical knowledge was important, however, the majority of them did not readily engage in theoretical discussions during the focus groups or refer to their theoretical understandings when discussing children’s social and emotional development. Educators who drew on theoretical perspectives recognised that their theoretical knowledge was dependent on the level of educational training they received and their knowledge of children’s developmental milestones. Some educators suggested that a wide variety of differing qualifications from many training organisations influenced educators’ level of knowledge. Theoretical knowledge of children’s development and relationships was recognised as an important influence on educators’ knowledge, as reflected in the following comment:

“As educators, we need to be more educated on what … a two-year-old brain look[s] like, [or] what … a three-year-old [brain] look[s] like. And that’s what we really need, from what I’ve seen. The more educators are educated, the more they understand” (Educator 05).

c. Self-knowledge

This was recognised as an influence on educators’ knowledge of positive parent–child relationships, particularly parenting practices. Some educators stated that they had children of their own and drew on their personal experience of raising their own families. Educators also commonly referred to intuitive knowledge, which they defined as just knowing or knowledge by instinct; beliefs that amount to knowledge based on intuitions or ‘gut instinct’ as shown in the following quotes by educators:

“arising… you can just tell. You just know within your heart” (Educator 13).

“There is something… there is an aura about; it’s hard to put a finger on it” (Educator 05).

“In my mind, little alarm bells go off” (Educator 05).

3. Educators’ role

Educators discussed their role in supporting the parent–child relationship and revealed the most diversity in responses including: (a) supporting parent–child relationships; (b) reluctance in supporting parent–child relationships; (c) supporting parents and children but not their relationships and (d) challenges in supporting parents.

a. Supporting parent–child relationships

Some educators acknowledged that part of their role in caring for children entails supporting parent–child relationships. They felt it is relevant to their work, part of their duty of care to children, and it is important to be supportive, non-judgemental and have conversations with parents to promote parent–child relationships, as reflected in the following comment:

“You just do what’s in the best interest of the child. You know, at the end of the day, you’ve got a duty of care to the children, so you know you’re gonna do what’s right for them. And yeah, you have to address the situation (parent–child relationship) with the families” (Educator 13).

These educators also felt comfortable sharing social and emotional development and parent–child relationship knowledge with parents, stating that some parents will seek an educator’s support:

“That’s right, they may be anxious and feel out of their depth. And that’s also why our role is very important; of having those little signals or a red flag might pop up and you might say, ‘I’ve got some information about … would you like me to bring it in?’” (Educator 07).

b. Reluctance in supporting parent–child relationships

Some educators indicated they were reluctant and did not feel comfortable being involved in supporting the parent–child relationship. They felt it was not part of their role because they were not qualified to support families in this area and didn’t feel comfortable approaching parents. They also stated that they found it difficult to know when to get involved in the relationship and that their role is only to support parents up to a ‘certain point’. The following educator quote highlights their hesitation in being involved:

“That’s kind of a fine line. You do try to raise the subject in a non-confrontational way, in order to get an idea of what is happening; but then, other than that, not really. It’s not really our job to go and say, ‘Well, I think you should be doing this more’: You can’t push into somebody’s life” (Educator 12).

c. Supporting parents and children but not their relationships

Many educators had difficulty discussing their role in supporting parent–child relationships and avoided directly answering these questions. Instead, they discussed the ways they support parents, families and children (not the parent–child relationship):
I think that by emailing parents the portfolio ... we are building up that relationship. Or if there is a problem, even just phoning a parent and letting them know that something has happened ... the [child] is okay ... we are just letting you know (Educator 09).

d. Challenges in supporting parents

Challenges identified: a lack of time with parents, parents who are not connected to the ECEC settings or educators, having difficult conversations with parents (such as raising developmental and behavioural concerns), language barriers (English as a second language), educators’ levels of knowledge, and parent perceptions of educators’ knowledge and skills.

The biggest challenge in supporting parents was the lack of time educators had to speak with parents. Many noted that there were limited opportunities to talk with parents, some were not present or did not stop to engage with educators during drop-off and pick-up times. One educator indicated a lack of time impacting her ability to build relationships with parents:

I think it is something, as a [care] profession[all], you can struggle with in this climate. Climate of a very fast paced life—very highly professional and highly busy. Sometimes we lose that relationship, or it is a bit hard to actually build [one] because we might not see [the parents] or things like that (Educator 07).

Building relationships with parents was identified as being important to then be able to have difficult conversations with them, because, if the relationship between the educator and parent is poor, delicate conversations (behavioural or developmental concerns) with them become more difficult. Educators reported language barriers between parents and educators, and the absence of parental contact as common challenges they faced on a daily basis.

Some educators nominated the variance in educators’ knowledge and skills as challenging, as they found this influenced educators’ ability to engage with parents. The following educator was eager to understand the level of her colleagues’ knowledge and skills:

If I was able to get a broader understanding of what the educators have learnt and their skills—coming from different institutes, and us understanding what they know—finding ways to provide them with the strategies they need to support parents [would be easier] (Educator 08).

It was noted by a few educators that some parents are not aware of educators’ level of knowledge and skills. They recognised that parents perceive educators as ‘babysitters or carers’ rather than professionals with specific skills to educate children and promote development.

4. Gaining knowledge

Educators recognised personal ongoing learning and the building of knowledge and skills as an important professional element required to support positive parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. Educators’ discussions focused on describing their current knowledge and building future knowledge.

Current knowledge

Educators did not recall a focus on social and emotional development or parent–child relationship topics in their professional learning. A majority of educators stated that they had not previously participated in, or been given an opportunity to engage in, professional learning relating to children’s social and emotional development or parent–child relationships. They also acknowledged they are not currently engaged in professional learning on these topics and they are not aware of ongoing professional learning sessions in these areas. A few educators had attended workshops on children’s social and emotional development but found these to provide only basic information—they would have liked to have been provided with more theoretical content and advice on how their theoretical knowledge can be used to understand the impact of children’s social and emotional development and relationships on children’s outcomes.

Educators made suggestions regarding the methods they found best supported their ongoing learning relating to social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. Practical learning methods were the most popular format suggested by educators and included: role plays, practical examples and strategies, interactive centre-based activities, hands on, face-to-face and visual learning. One educator noted that follow-up and ongoing learning would be important in order to support best practice within ECEC settings. Many educators also discussed peer support learning. Support from peers was seen as an important strategy for educators to receive ongoing understanding and knowledge within their work context. A few educators recognised that having a strong, supportive mentor was useful for them to gain knowledge and build skills:

It’s about good, important mentoring in our profession ... my mentor was able to have quality practices that I was able to role model along the way, and I think I’ve just taken that with me (Educator 07).

Many educators also discussed the importance of working together as a team with their colleagues, through peer support, mentoring, practical observations and sharing of information. Sharing theoretical, practical and familial knowledge between colleagues has been a successful strategy embraced by educators to support the work they do with parents and families.
Building future knowledge

Most educators described being eager to learn more in order to best support parents, children, their relationship and development. Future professional learning on topics relating to children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships was widely acknowledged as critical areas for educators to build further knowledge and skills. They were particularly interested in expanding their theoretical knowledge and being able to share this with parents. Future professional learning was seen as a constructive ongoing practice for building educator knowledge and skills. They readily discussed content to advance knowledge, developing skills and resources that could be available to build their knowledge.

Many educators spoke of the importance of partnering with parents and felt they would benefit from future professional learning that focused on building relationships with parents. One educator stated that building relationships is at the core of children’s learning outcomes:

... if we are talking about relationships, then we have to be ready. If we took it back to the five basic Learning Outcomes, not one of those is going to be able to occur if you don’t have the base relationships (Educator 07).

Educators consistently spoke of their need to be supported when communicating with parents, particularly when addressing difficult situations and behaviours. Some educators suggested that information on how to approach parents would be useful, and is reflected in this quote:

... because some educators don’t know how to start a conversation. They’re really just scared, or just nervous (Educator 14).

Many educators suggested that they would like more detailed content and documentation on children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships to share with parents. One educator suggested more information about the cause and effect of parent–child relationships and the impact on children’s social and emotional development. A number of educators also suggested it was important for the content to be current and include evidence-based practices so they can share with parents the information that comes from theoretically-grounded empirical evidence rather than personal opinions, as highlighted by the following educator:

... they can actually see this is the research that has been done, this is current practice and what we know about relationships and development (Educator 04).

Across all focus groups, educators identified communication and confidence as the most critical interpersonal skills required by educators to support parent–child relationships. The ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with parents was seen as a vital part of an educator’s role. Some educators linked having effective communication skills with increased confidence, as shown in this educator example:

I think experience; it’s a learnt process, being able to speak with families. I wasn’t very confident [earlier], and then I was able to develop [the skill] to communicate (Educator 17).

Others acknowledged that educators who have strong teaching and developmental knowledge are confident and competent when communicating with families:

Articulating and knowing your teaching and development knowledge ... When it is working well, those conversations are a piece of cake; you’re strong in your knowledge ... (Educator 07).

Collaborative skills, with both parents and peers were also highly considered by educators. Sharing of information between parents and educators, rather than judging and instructing, was seen as working more collaboratively for the benefit of everyone (parent, child and educator).

The findings from focus groups with ELC educators showed that educators had a robust awareness of the importance of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. They were eager to share their perceptions and provided many examples of children’s development and relationships they witnessed or experienced during their time as an educator. More importantly, they understood that relationships are critical to children’s social and emotional development and that developing strong social and emotional skills during early childhood has a significant influence on all areas of development, health and wellbeing across the entire life course.

Educators acknowledged the importance of establishing quality relationships and interactions with parents, including developing partnerships and working collaboratively to enhance children’s development and learning. They recognised that benefits for children occur more often when they engage in relational factors with parents (communication, support, understanding child rearing practices, attitudes and knowledge) compared to general parent involvement such as structured events (Mother’s Day and Christmas activities). Educators recognised theoretical knowledge of children’s social and emotional development and relationships was important, however, this source of knowledge was not readily utilised and many educators requested further exposure to theory and evidence-based practices to support their everyday practices with parents and children.

Discussion

Meaningful relationships between parents and educators have been linked to a stronger social and emotional development of children and are reportedly essential to support strong connections between home and ECEC environments and children’s adaptive development (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark & Moodie, 2009; Lang et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2013).
Despite educators’ willingness to engage in building relationships with parents, many were hesitant to support the parent–child relationship. Supporting parent–child relationships has been associated with improvements in children’s behaviours and interactions between parent and child; parents report increased parenting, empathy and communication skills, parenting confidence and developmental expectations (O’Connor et al., 2016). Parent–child relationships may benefit from educators sharing their knowledge of children’s development and supportive parenting practices with parents. Educator knowledge (theoretical, child development and parenting skills) has been found to be a fundamental requirement to engage with parents about the development of their child (Forry, Moodie, Simkin & Rothenberg, 2011). Theoretical and developmental knowledge assists educators to think about their practice from a more informed perspective (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Nolan & Raban, 2016). As confirmed in these findings, educators’ knowledge tends to be tacit or implicit; that is, drawing on personal experiences and exposure to practical experiences to build knowledge and influence practices (Krátká, 2015; Nolan & Raban, 2016). Implicit knowledge consists of an understanding, intuition or ‘knowing’ learnt through repeated exposure to personal and context-specific experiences, observations and practices. Educators are influenced by cognitive, affective and evaluative elements (how they think, feel and analyse observations and practices) and draw on their implicit knowledge to engage in holistic practices, such as recognising and incorporating family values and practices of their children and families within the early learning setting (McGill, 2007; Sun, Mathews & Lane, 2007).

Although, as implicit knowledge is unrecorded and based on experiences and observations, educators find verbalising implicit knowledge challenging, leading to educator knowledge and practices to be seen and felt but rarely described or communicated (Kingston, 2012; McGill, 2007). Educators noted that sharing of knowledge and practices with parents to support parent–child relationships was not commonly practised and suggested this was influenced by low self-confidence and communication skills; highlighting the difficulty of verbalising their implicit knowledge directly with parents. Building knowledge with theoretical, evidence-based approaches was identified as a strategy to strengthen educators’ capacity in sharing of information with parents.

The findings indicated that the educators’ use of implicit knowledge to interpret parent–child relationships was strong as they provided numerous examples of parent–child interactions and were able to describe functional and dysfunctional relationships through narratives. Educators’ implicit knowledge and understanding was most strongly influenced by their observations of parent–child interactions. Observations of interactions between parent and child and practical engagement with parents and children are critical elements required for developing educators’ implicit knowledge (Sun et al., 2007). Observational skills were highly utilised by educators: observed interactions, events and achievements were interpreted and consequently contributed to their understandings of children and parents. Despite nominating a lack of time to observe and interact with parents as a significant challenge, the majority of educators confidently provided many examples of functional and dysfunctional parent–child relationships indicating that they have considerable capacity to gauge the status of relationships contributing to their implicit knowledge.

Building on existing implicit knowledge through the reflection of beliefs, values and practices, sharing of narratives, integration of theories and interpreting the combination of implicit and explicit knowledge into practice may deepen educators’ understanding and knowledge and provide them with resources they require to support parent–child relationships (Ohlsson, 2014; Shannon, Smith & Dana, 2016). Research relating to educator learning indicates that educators’ knowledge acquisition may benefit from integrating multiple sources of knowledge, such as existing knowledge, pre-service education, practical exposure to and understanding of their children and their families, and ongoing professional development (Pitsoe & Mala, 2012). Educators are encouraged to engage in self-reflection practices in order to examine their beliefs and personal and professional values in order to gain deeper understandings of their interactions with children and families and their practices (Day, 1999; McGill, 2007; Nolan & Raban, 2016).

Theoretical content and knowledge of current evidence-based practices relating to parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development were requested by many educators to further advance their understandings and build their confidence when engaging with parents. Building on implicit knowledge with explicit knowledge (definite and clear information) relating to theoretical concepts and current evidence may have a significant influence on the quality of care and education an educator provides, highlighting the importance of incorporating explicit knowledge, in addition to implicit knowledge, when engaging with both children and parents (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014). Hence, using implicit knowledge as a foundation to gain further knowledge, through the integration of theoretical approaches and concepts, may enable educators to develop the confidence and skills they require to nurture parent–child relationships.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to the limited formal documentation of educators’ knowledge of parent–child relationships and their role in supporting parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. Educators recognised that parent–child relationships are important...
for children's social and emotional development and revealed a good understanding of children's social and emotional development by identifying the influences, skills and strategies to support children's development. The findings of this study indicate that the educators are well placed to support parent–child relationships. Practical experiences and observations of parents and children provide a strong foundation for educators to build further knowledge and support parent–child relationships. Engaging in self-reflective practices and integrating explicit knowledge (theoretical approaches and evidence-based practices) with existing implicit knowledge was recognised as an important element required to further build skills and knowledge. Empowering educators with knowledge, skills and resources may strengthen educators' confidence, communication skills and everyday practices to further foster and nurture parent–child relationships and consequently promote children's social and emotional development. These findings will critically inform the development of an ECEC intervention to be available to educators to promote parent–child relationships.

Endnotes

1 Five Learning Outcomes (DEEWR, 2009)

1. Children have a strong sense of identity
2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world
3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
4. Children are confident and involved learners
5. Children are effective communicators

ORCID i/Ds

Amanda O'Connor: orcid.org/0000-0003-0185-561X
Andrea Nolan: orcid.org/0000-0003-3519-6317
Helen Skouteris: orcid.org/0000-0001-9959-5750

References


of which they are present. They will also be given a PLS and consent form.

Once the group has commenced, the researchers will introduce the study and PLS. They will talk through the PLS with everyone present and then ask a series of questions to check their understanding of the content of the PLS. These will include questions such as: ‘what do we mean when we say, “voluntary”? ’ ‘when can you stop participating in this group discussion?’ etc. Any misunderstandings will then be clarified and everyone will be asked if they would like to continue. For those who agree to stay, the meeting will commence, as follows.

Questions will be specific to the kinds of experience educators have in family-centred practice and supporting parent–child relationships. We will aim for the questions to provide an opportunity for a wide range of issues to be identified while minimising the risk of disclosure of non-target, sensitive information, and important target detail being lost amongst other less relevant concerns.

The approach to questioning will involve an introductory statement on each topic of discussion. This statement is designed to set the tone as empathic, warm, supportive, and open to ideas. More targeted questioning can be asked following this if needed.

The group discussions will follow the order of proceedings below:
- Collective greetings
- Personal introductions
- Acknowledgement of Indigenous title
- Study preamble
- Review of PLS and checking for consent
- Participants provided with and asked to complete demographic details form

Introductory information
We are looking at how the ECEC sector can support educators to engage in family-centred practices and support parent–child relationships. When we talk about relationships we are referring to the interactions between educators, parents and children, focusing particularly on the quality of the emotional bond between parent and child. To do this we want to talk with you and find out what is important. We are interested in your knowledge of parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development and your views on an educator’s role in supporting these topics. We are also interested in finding out how any additional training or support could help you to work with families and how it could meet your needs.

To do this, we are going to ask you a series of questions that we will discuss as a group. So that everyone gets the opportunity to share information, it’s important that we don’t interrupt when another person is speaking and that we all respect what another person has said. Because we are going to be asking about your experience in working

Appendix A: Educator focus group

Parent–child relationships and family-centred practice

Discussion protocol
Participants will be greeted individually in an informal manner by researchers. Extra time will be allowed for participants who may be running late. Participants will be provided with a Plane Language Statement (PLS) and consent form upon entry. If participants arrive after the session has commenced, they will be invited to join in and we will include their input on topics for the discussion


with families, including those who are vulnerable, we ask that you do not discuss details of what you have heard outside this session. Please do not use the names of the children and parents when sharing your experiences. We cannot guarantee that what you share will be kept confidential because we are in a group. However, please try to be open and honest because we want to hear your thoughts and opinions.

As we’ve discussed already, the information you provide will be used to suggest ways we can support you better to work with families. Any reports about the results from the research will be in summary form and will not include any information that can identify you.

Check consent
‘Children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children’s learning and development. Professionals too, play a role in advancing children’s learning and development.’

Topics

1. Understanding of family-centred practice

‘Professionals engage in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives. This is a broad term and people can have different understandings of what it means. We are interested to know how you understand family-centred practice and how you demonstrate it in your work.’

Broad question: What does family-centred practice mean to you?

1.1 Why is it important to improve connections between home and ECEC settings?

1.2 What are the benefits of family-centred practice?

2. Sharing information

‘Ongoing communication with families is a priority in family-centred practice. We are interested in understanding how your centre communicates with families.’

Broad question: How do you share information with parents in your centre?

2.1 What information do you share with families already?

2.2 Do you have an initial discussion when a family first joins your centre? What do you discuss?

2.3 Are you open to discussing children’s social and emotional development and relationship topics with parents?

3. Families as experts

‘Regard families as experts on their children’s lives and actively seek children’s and families’ views and take them into account in practice. We are interested in understanding how your centre listens to families and how you respond to their input.’

Broad question: How do you encourage families to share information about their child and their child-rearing values and practices?

3.1 Why is it important to acknowledge families’ values and practices?

3.2 Do you actively practice recommendations made by families?

3.3 What are some of the challenges you face when engaging with families?

4. Parent–child relationships

‘The parent–child relationship is a combination of unique behaviours, feelings and expectations, and consists of interactions influenced by the quality of the emotional bond between the parent and child. We are interested in gaining an understanding of your knowledge of parent–child relationships.’

Broad question: What do you know about parent–child relationships?

4.1 How important are parent–child relationships?

4.2 Do you observe interactions between parent and child?

4.3 Do you discuss these interactions with parents?

4.4 Do you think it’s important to have a good understanding of parent–child relationships?

5. Children’s social and emotional development

‘Parents and early childhood educators are critical agents required for children’s social and emotional development, contributing to skill development via ongoing modelling and teaching, and the provision of learning opportunities. We are interested in gaining an understanding of your knowledge of children’s social and emotional development.’

Broad question: What do you know about children’s social and emotional development?

5.1 What do you think influences children’s social and emotional development?

5.2 Can you give an example of family-centred practice in supporting children’s social and emotional development?

6. The educator’s role

‘Coherence across learning contexts, which include home and ECEC settings, is crucial.’

Broad question: What is your role in supporting parents and the relationship with their child?

6.1 How can you foster and nurture parent–child relationships?

6.2 What are the challenges you may be faced with?

6.3 Is this relevant to your work?
6.4 What skills would you need to support parent–child relationships?

7. Resource content

'We are investigating if there is a need to develop a resource that would support you to foster and nurture parent–child relationships. We are interested in knowing what you think should be included in this resource.'

Broad question: What content do you think needs to be included?

7.1 What topics would you like covered in the resource?
7.2 What situations would you like covered?
7.3 Are there particular skills that you would like to learn?
7.4 What would need to be included for you to feel that it worthwhile?

8. Training modalities

'Resource booklets/binders we know often end up sitting on bookshelves and people forget to look at them. We want to know, what is the best way for you to learn about how to work more effectively with families?'

Broad question: If we were to design training, what would suit you best?

8.1 Face-to-face training?
8.2 Online training?
8.3 Mixture of online and face-to-face?
8.4 On the job coaching from someone?
8.5 Other ways?

9. Previous and current professional development

To make sure that anything we design fits within the system already in place, how do you currently complete professional development?

9.1 Tell us, what mode of training do you currently use? (Face-to-face, online, discussion boards, on the job coaching.)
9.2 If you have completed professional development on parent–child relationships/family-centred practice already, can you give some information on what organisation ran it and what you took away from that training?
9.3 How many hours of professional development have you completed in the last 12 months?
9.4 In thinking about your professional development priorities, how high would you rate collaboration with families?

10. Given what you know about this project, is there anything else that we need to know that would help us develop something that you would find useful and worthwhile?