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Enhanced Early Childhood Placement Program to Facilitate Family Involvement for Future Teachers

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Abstract: Navigating family involvement is commonly a cause of concern for pre-service teachers who will soon be early childhood teacher graduates in Australia. This paper uses a Research by Design methodology to analyse the interview and focus group data from 108 pre-service and 135 mentor teachers involved in an enhanced early childhood professional placement partnerships program. This program was used to advance professional relationships through shared professional learning and making time for collegial discussions. The findings show that the program interventions have enabled pre-service teachers to focus on family involvement while on placements, with some sharing their own documentation of children's learning directly with families.

Keywords: parents; kindergarten; preschool; family engagement; learning experiences; teacher education; practicum

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1. Introduction

Family and parental involvement is a highly valued concept around the world in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, as families are commonly known as the child's first teacher (Department of Education 2022). Early childhood teachers (ECTs), who establish relationships with and support families, may have a significant effect on children's early childhood development, more than any teaching practice or aspects of curriculum (Winship et al. 2021).

However, while the importance of family involvement and engagement is well reported in ECEC literature and ECEC curriculum and policy internationally, there are studies from around the world (Alasuutari 2010) that present alternate, biased interpretations of parental involvement. These biased interpretations include family involvement primarily serving as support systems for ECTs and children in ECEC settings, rather than viewing familial involvement as a collaborative practice, a commitment, and a shared responsibility for all the parties involved (Hakyemez-Paul et al. 2021).

In contrast to these biased interpretations, the second version of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) focuses on family involvement as it "emphasizes the collaboration of educators, families and children to support and enhance children's connections and capabilities, and for children to actively participate as citizens" (Department of Education 2022).

Family involvement in their child's early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is understood to have a significant impact on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development and social skills (Freeman and Knopf 2007; Hakyemez-Paul et al. 2021; Powell et al. 2010), alongside children's academic achievements (Boonk et al. 2018; Cosso et al. 2022; Hakyemez-Paul et al. 2021; Powell et al. 2010). Family involvement has been reported to be beneficial in not only supporting the children's holistic development but also in enhancing the educational programs by including the parents in decision-making (Epstein et al. 2019) about the educational programs, including contributing to provisions and resourcing for the program to occur (Hakyemez-Paul et al. 2021).

The benefits of family involvement to children are highlighted not only in research but also in ECEC curriculum and policy. The EYLF emphasises the holistic impact that genuine and authentic partnerships through family involvement and respectful relationships with children and families have on children.

Educators' practices and the relationships they form with children and their families have a significant effect on children's participation in early childhood education, engagement in learning opportunities, and success as learners. Children thrive when they, their families, and their educators work together in partnership to support their learning, development, and wellbeing (Department of Education 2022).

In this paper, we define genuine and authentic partnerships and involvement with families as experiences between families and pre-service teachers (PSTs) where both parties communicate and interact with each other (Winship et al. 2021). Family involvement in ECEC settings can occur when ECE professionals share information and updates with families about the program. But it depends on how ECE professionals understand family involvement and how cultures of family involvement are created and upheld. Learning how to value and understand family involvement begins during the process of becoming an ECT; therefore, it is important that family involvement is something that is centred not only in the content learned in early childhood teacher education (ECTE) but also through the practical placements that PSTs undertake as a part of their ECTE (Sutton et al. 2020; Winship et al. 2021). Engaging in authentic experiences with families is considered to be a key aspect of developing the confidence of PSTs in working together with families (Winship et al. 2021), and professional placement experiences are the best way for PSTs to embark on authentic ways of connecting with families. Some common practices that support and build communication with families in ECEC include family–teacher meetings or conferences, parent evenings, and communication journals (Kambouri et al. 2022). Family-centred practices, such as conversational cycles, where PSTs engage with families at the beginning of an experience and debrief them at the conclusion, are also noted to support PSTs in involving families while on placement (Sutton et al. 2020).

PSTs are reported to feel limited confidence in involving families in early childhood settings (Winder and Corter 2016), particularly when engaging in one-on-one discussions with families (Taylor and Kim 2020). PSTs need opportunities to practice their skills, build a sense of confidence, and try out opportunities of engaging in a variety of collaborative family-involvement experiences. Without these opportunities, on-placement PSTs are likely to have limited experience and, therefore, will likely rely on their own past biographical experiences (Winder and Corter 2016).

Family Involvement in Pre-Service Early Childhood Teacher Education in Australia

A key issue in the preparation of ECTs is helping PSTs to recognise the importance of family involvement in ECEC (Winder and Corter 2016). Another issue is to assist PSTs in building their confidence and ability in enacting strategies that encourage and support families to engage with the ECEC setting and to be involved in their child's education and learning while they are at the ECEC service (Freeman and Knopf 2007). PSTs have described feeling ill-equipped to work with families at the conclusion of the ECTE program (Evans 2013; Sutton et al. 2020).

Understanding how to communicate with, engage, support, and involve families in what goes on in ECEC settings is known to require more nuanced learning and practice than learning how to work with children in ECEC settings (Brown et al. 2014; Winship et al. 2021). This is due to the diverse cultural, social, and economic requirements of families that necessitate ECTs to carefully consider how they can build their skills and willingness to engage with families in respectful, supportive, and sensitive ways (Calzada et al. 2015; Winship et al. 2021). Some families may also experience periods of more significant challenge and stress where they seek out additional support from ECTs and ECEC settings. For example, ECTs working with families of children with disability are

likely to need to involve families in more regular communications and support as they co-navigate supporting the child in partnership (Winship et al. 2021).

In addition to authentic opportunities to connect with families while engaging in professional placement experiences, ECTE programs require specific content that relates to family involvement. The requirements for ECTE programs are set by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), which is Australia's national regulatory body that monitors, evaluates, and supports federal and state governments in administering Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF) (Nolan et al. 2024). The NQF provides the benchmark for quality ECEC provision across Australia. While ACECQA's requirements for ECTE programs includes content and information about working with families, there is no requirement for a whole individual unit focused on working with families; instead, the topic is required to be evidenced within an ECTE program. Despite including content and information about working with families in the ECTE programs, attending a lot of lectures, and sharing articles and information with PSTs, they are unlikely to develop the confidence and knowledge required to work with families without practical and diverse experience with families. This is partially because developing trusting relationships between teachers and families takes time and because the social and emotional dimensions and pressures of working with families are difficult to address without PSTs experiencing this in practice (Willemse et al. 2018). While, anecdotally, the author and colleagues in this project have received evidence of some placement mentors not wanting PSTs to speak with families while they are on placement, at this time there is a dearth of literature in this area, with more research needed.

ACECQA requires that PSTs in ECTE degrees in Australia complete at least 80 days of placement when undertaking undergraduate qualifications, with just 60 days of placement in postgraduate qualifications. How placement is configured and planned for at each ECTE institution is up to the institution itself (Nolan et al. 2024). At Deakin University, reported in this paper, each placement block, conceptualised as an iteration for the purpose of the Early Childhood Professional Practice Partnerships (EC PPP) project, consisted of 15, 20, or 25 days, with just two iterations (iterations 6 and 9) of the nine iterations in total that included a 15-day placement. Typical placement structures at Deakin University involve PSTs completing each placement block at different ECEC settings or primary schools if enrolled in the dual ECE/primary degree. This diverse experience aims to provide a wider breadth of experiences. However, as a part of the EC PPP project, this provided an opportunity for the structure and planning of placement to be reconfigured based on live feedback and evaluation from participants as this project progressed over 5 years.

In this paper, the term "family" is used to describe the inclusive role of children's caregivers. This includes parents and other biological relatives and non-relative caregivers who regularly care for the child. However, it is important to note that participants often used the terms "parents" to describe the child's family they most often interact with and retain the use of these terms in their quotes. When discussing the study's results, the terms "PST" and "MT" (mentor teacher) were used to describe the individual participants who participated in this study.

This paper was guided by the following research question:

What are the important elements that a professional placement program should include in order to facilitate pre-service teachers to take a more active role in early childhood education and care-family partnerships?

2. Materials and Methods

This study was undertaken as part of a larger project—The Early Childhood Professional Practice Partnerships (EC PPP)—that was undertaken over 5 years (2019–2024) at Deakin University, including 9 iterations in total. Deakin University's EC PPP model was implemented over nine distinct iterations. This started with the first iteration in July 2019 and continued through to December 2023/February 2024 for the ninth and final iteration. In EC PPP, the MT and PST pairs actively participated in a professional learning community

that was created during placements. The community involved MTs and PSTs who engaged as a pair in a series of three professional learning workshops that focused on a particular pedagogical topic. This topic was informed by insights from participants from previous iterations. Participant pairs joined in two professional conversational meetings together with other participants to reflect on and openly discuss professional issues that had arisen during the placement. MTs were actively involved in assessing the PSTs' professional capabilities to be and later become an ECT. The MTs' role was also to support PSTs to actively develop their teaching capabilities. This was enabled by facilitating opportunities for PSTs to actively apply their developing knowledge, make clear and concrete connections with practice, and engage, implement, and later reflect on their teaching (Nolan et al. 2024).

It is important to note that this paper draws specifically on a project that was undertaken in Victoria, which is the Australian state that experienced the harshest lockdowns (Goh et al. 2023). Victoria experienced a series of 6 lockdowns that totalled 262 days and saw Melbourne, the capital city, being described as the most locked-down city in the world (Goh et al. 2023). This project and iterations from iteration 2 onwards were affected by the multiple impacts of COVID-19. This included challenges with communication with families, pressures on children's, families', and teachers' wellbeing, higher levels of sickness, and, therefore, absence from work for ECTs and educators (Bussey et al. 2022; Nolan et al. 2024). The challenge of navigating family involvement for PSTs became a heightened issue between iterations 2 and 4 when there were COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria, which reduced the amount of physical contact between families and ECEC settings, and therefore, connections between PSTs and families while out on placement significantly reduced in this time. Therefore, this became a keen area of focus for MTs in iteration 5 onwards.

The EC PPP project overall focused on building collaborative and professional relationships between EC settings and the university and on strengthening the placement experiences for the PSTs and MTs engaged in these placements (Nolan et al. 2024). The EC PPP project used a *Research by Design* methodology (Cotton et al. 2009), as this methodology provides opportunities for research projects to 'address educational practice in naturalistic contexts' instead of collecting data from research participants in decontextualised ways (Plomp 2013). A Research by Design (Cotton et al. 2009; Plomp 2013) methodology calls for iterative shifts in the study's design in order to respond to the collective feedback from participants and researchers who work towards solving an 'educational problem'. It was deemed an appropriate methodological approach for this study, as in this study the 'educational problem' (Plomp 2013) that we were working on was the increasing shortage of ECTs (Education Services Australia 2021) in the state of Victoria and understanding the factors that discouraged new graduates away from a career in ECEC. In this study, we sought out a methodological approach that would enable PSTs and MTs to talk openly about their ECEC placement experiences in order to understand what was influencing and impacting PSTs' decision to join the ECEC profession. The project team was keen to also learn more about placement experiences of PSTs and MTs, with a focus on using the insights from the adjustments made to project interventions in each iteration to actively respond to participants and strengthen their placement experience. A Research by Design methodological process Plomp (2013) includes three systematic phases. This includes (1) the identification of the 'educational problem' for the study, (2) the development of 'interventions', and (3) an active evaluation to determine if supplementary adaptations or modifications were required for future iterations. The key feature of Deakin University's EC PPP Model for the study was the simultaneous integration of a process of research and data collection that ran parallel with the professional placement components of this project, which enabled a live evaluation that was evidence-informed and adapted while the professional placement project moved through each of the iterations.

2.1. Participants

Participants were eligible for this study if they had taken part in at least one of the iterations of EC PPP project as either a PST or MT for this project. The participant groups

included either MTs that supported a PST who was one of Deakin University's undergraduate or postgraduate Early Childhood or dual Primary/Early Childhood teaching degrees or PSTs enrolled in Deakin University's undergraduate or postgraduate Early Childhood or dual Primary/Early Childhood teaching degrees. While PSTs are either in undergraduate or postgraduate programs, both groups of PSTs are completing an initial teacher education program where professional experience is sequenced similarly.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The research component of the EC PPP project included focus groups held at the beginning of the placement for each iteration in groups of PSTs and MTs and semi-structured individual interviews held over Zoom at the conclusion of each iteration. MTs and PSTs were asked the same questions from the perspective of being a MT or PST. Questions focused on the project and placement experience and also responded to the participants' responses. Data were collected from each of the nine iterations between 2019 and 2024. Before the start of data collection, ethical approval was obtained from Deakin University's human ethics research committee Project No.: HAE-19–128.

Qualitative data from PSTs' and MTs' individual interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis first involved an inductive scan of the data (this included an open-ended search for any clear patterns in the data); this was followed by a deductive scan of the data to check the data (this included a focus on the most dominant words and comments to confirm their validity as a clear theme). The process of repetitively reading through the data transcripts and looking for recurrent patterns in the participants' responses assisted the researchers in this project to recognise, identify, and clarify dominant themes (Lichtman 2023).

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the three findings and discussion related to family involvement in the ECEC settings, which are key concepts for PSTs to learn more about and experience while on professional placement. This section begins with some overall findings and discussion about the experience of family involvement in this project before moving into the three key findings related to family involvement in this project. These findings include the following: changing the timing of placement experiences improved PSTs' opportunities to engage with families; repeated placements enriched placement experiences and assisted PSTs in understanding the role of the ECT when working with families; and sharing children's learning with families is a process of building confidence through relationships.

Throughout the EC PPP project, MTs were keen to share their thoughts about involving PSTs in learning more about family involvement, including how to engage in it and its benefits:

> *Making really strong connections with families is what really gives our job its credit. If we have really good, strong connections with families it shows the job that we do. Creating really good bonds and connections within the community and families that make our service and make our profession what it is. I think if you've got that rapport with the families and children the profession will speak for itself. We need more people in the profession to have that labour of love, and love what they do, have those connections within the community so when you you're at the local shopping centre and you see families, the fact that they want to come up and say hi to you and have a little chat to you. Those connections that you've made with them make them feel like they're connected to their community, it makes them feel like there's that sense of trust in who you are. I think having those connections make our profession seem more than just the care factor. . . We're a big part of that community and I think those connections show that. (MT, Interview, Iteration 5).*

MTs encouraged their PSTs to ask them lots of questions so that they can support them by clarifying the questions they had about practice, including practices related to relationships in the kindergarten they were on placement in:

> *She was asking lots of questions which was great because I said, "If you're not sure on anything, ask why because every single thing we do here, there is a reason behind it. . . You need to come and ask us why because we'll be able to support you in knowing why. Most of the time it might be because we've worked out something with the family, we're going to work on this together, and we've come to some decision-making together about the process for this particular child. We're working from home and at kindergarten on the same things, and using the same methods, so the child's not getting conflicting messages". (MT, Interview, Iteration 5)*

By explicitly sharing her strategies of working together in partnership with families, this MT was able to assist the PST to learn about the ways in which she involves families in shared decision-making. Epstein et al. (2019) describe families being involved in decision-making as being one of the key types of family involvement.

Throughout the process of the EC PPP project, feedback from participants led to multiple adaptations to future iterations. A key example of this was the suggestion from MTs for PSTs' placements to be for longer periods of time or the MT's recommendations for PSTs to return to the same ECEC service for a second placement within the same year. This repeated placement in the same service adaptation to the placement iteration was undertaken in order to not only build more PST experience in working with the same group of children and being able to work with children at different stages throughout the year in their kindergarten program but also to build stronger relationships and involvement between PSTs and families. The suggestions for adaptations to future iterations by participant MTs were checked with PSTs in interviews before they were enacted by the project team for the following iterations.

Another example of the strength of the iterative approach and use of the Research by Design methodology (Cotton et al. 2009; Plomp 2013) used in this study was the ability to listen to the feedback from participants and respond by planning for the next iterations. The feedback from participants was used to hear their thoughts and concerns and subsequently adjust the EC PPP program to meet the participants' needs. From the beginning of the EC PPP project, MTs shared their concerns that they had observed new graduates appearing ill-prepared for the busiest time of the year for ECTs—the beginning of the year—when a whole new cohort of children starts; therefore, future placements were changed to respond to this feedback.

3.1. Changing the Timing of Placement Experiences Improved Pre-Service Teachers' Opportunities to Engage with Families

In response to the feedback in iteration six, the placement was moved to the beginning of the year to provide PSTs the experience to "see a start of a year, the busyness of that. Because that's completely different when you're establishing those relationships with parents. Very different to the end of the year." (MT, Focus Group, Iteration 1). In later iterations, two MTs shared their concerns about preparing PSTs to understand the importance of this time of the year:

> *It takes that first week to get to know what's going on, and even though they're going to be new children the teachers are also learning about new children, and new families and making those connections. At the beginning of the year, they are seeing how important it is that we make the connections with the whole family. We're not just responsible for the children's learning, we're responsible for the whole family because if the family are on board the children get a much better experience. (MT, Interview, Iteration 5)*

> *The start of the year is such a busy time, but you don't get taught that in university. You don't know how to go through the paperwork and have those conversations with family to gather all of that extra behind the scenes (MT, Interview, Iteration 5)*

As mentioned, in response to this continual feedback, as soon as was possible, a placement was reorganised in iteration 6 for PSTs to embark on their placement in the new year from the first week in term 1. The first time this beginning of the year placement was

offered, this information was shared with MTs in iteration 5 interviews, who shared interest and excitement about this opportunity:

> *I think that start of the year is a fantastic opportunity for pre-service teachers to see—generally they'll come into an already set routine, so they'll come in where those really rich discussions about the combinations of children, and how we're going to support these children in settling, and how we're going to support this parent in separating. Also, really good for the parents to see from day dot we do have students here, and that's normal. I think it's a great way to show new families, and hopefully not scare off pre-service teachers with the crying and the separation anxiety. (MT, Interview, Iteration 5).*

MTs shared their thoughts about how PSTs that typically come into placements later on in the year are able to see the stable and sensitive way that ECTs and families interact with each other. The stability and sensitivity of interactions between ECTs and families is well recognised as being an important factor in family involvement (Kambouri et al. 2022). MTs recognised that family involvement stemmed from ongoing relationships that had to start somewhere:

> *When PSTs see us talking to the families, we've already got this relationship, but at the start of the year we don't. It'll be good to see what strategies we use to try and build up a relationship to begin with. That'll be really exciting to see. . . they probably need more opportunities, or maybe it could even be in part of their assessment—to connect with families. I just felt for this placement my PST didn't, and reflecting, I probably didn't offer her the opportunity, but. . .she didn't ask for an opportunity either. . . The only time she really interacted with them [parents] was to get their permission or if she was writing a reflection or getting a child's voice, they would see that. But maybe next time, I will get them to be a part of the dismissal and opening just to build their confidence. (MT Interview, Iteration 5)*

This MT recognised a common issue for PSTs—limited confidence in working with families (Taylor and Kim 2020; Winship et al. 2021). She was aware of her own ways in which to assist PSTs to strengthen their confidence by involving families (Freeman and Knopf 2007). Another MT saw building family involvement into placement assessments as a strategy to build stronger understanding of the progression of family involvement throughout the year and the benefits of engaging with families from the outset. Including scaffolded experiences, such as assignments related to family involvement, has been suggested by researchers (Sutton et al. 2020). The value of the beginning of the year placements was shared by many MTs through their positive feedback:

> *That first placement we've just had was so valuable for the students to see with the setting up and the organising and what goes on behind the scenes before we even got to see a child. What happened before we even got to see a family come in. (MT Interview, Iteration 6)*

The process of modelling and involving the PST in setting up and building relationships with families from the very beginning of the year was described by this MT as "valuable". Preparing PSTs for the realities of the work of an ECT was a key focus for the MTs overall. Their goal was to encourage as many PSTs to join them in the profession as ECTs and to be well-prepared as a new graduate.

Likely due to the focus and concern on family involvement for PSTs during and after the period of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions between iterations 2 and 4, there was a heightened discussion on the topic of family involvement in the iteration 5 MT focus group. This resulted in an active discussion between MTs about the challenge of supporting PSTs with family involvement. Various strategies had been undertaken by the MTs over the iterations to involve PSTs in relationships with families. These strategies were undertaken because MTs had observed and commented in the focus group that for many of the PSTs that they had mentored over the years, building relationships with and learning how to involve families in the ECEC setting was typically a barrier.

The MTs' discussion also highlighted their concern about PSTs desiring to work as a teacher in ECEC settings rather than pursuing a role as a teacher in a primary school.

An ongoing goal for the EC PPP project and for the MTs was to encourage PSTs to join the ECEC profession, and they considered supporting and facilitating positive placement experiences to be a key strategy to enable this.

3.2. Repeated Placements Enriched Placement Experiences and Assisted PSTs in Understanding the Role of the Teacher When Working with Families

Deakin University's EC PPP team had consistently received feedback from MTs about the benefits of increasing the amount of time that PSTs had in ECEC settings:

> *I think it comes down to how we plan for kinder children, all the students are going to be different. I know during a five-week placement there's more time—but is there ever enough? There's more time to get to know the children and know the families and be confident enough. (MT, Interview, Iteration 5).*

A commonly reported concern from MTs in Australia relates to the quality of professional placement experiences (Patrick 2013). In response to this regular feedback, the Deakin University EC PPP academic team confirmed the decision to provide an opportunity for PSTs to return to the same ECEC setting for an additional placement within the same year. This adjustment was not mandated to MTs or PSTs, but the team found that only one of the PSTs chose to go elsewhere for her placement as she needed to be closer to home, and all other MT/PST pairs chose to repeat their placement experience together in the first time a repeated placement was offered. Repeated placements were offered for the first time in iterations 3 (May 2021) and 4 (August 2021). Positive feedback from MTs and PSTs enabled this practice to continue providing PSTs with up to 10 weeks in the same service over a four-month period. PSTs are recognised to experience significant growth in their knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy over time as they take part in teacher education programs; this growth also extends to their relationships and connections to families (Sutton et al. 2020).

One MT spoke about the benefits of the repeated placement for the PST. She highlighted the shift in practice with family involvement that the PST was present to witness. Between iterations 3 and 4, there were significant shifts in practice related to family involvement due to COVID-19 restrictions in ECEC settings (Bussey et al. 2022), and these shifts and differences in practice were highlighted by MTs and PSTs:

> *What she could see was the moving on in the journey. There wasn't anything specifically that had completely changed, apart from at that point we were now allowing parents to come into the service slightly towards the end, where we weren't at the beginning quite so much. Talking about how we're going to involve all the families and how could they all be involved in the end of year celebrations. (MT, Interview, Iteration 5)*

The level of trust created through a longer period of time that PSTs spent in ECEC settings meant that some MTs were comfortable involving PSTs to have an active role in working with families. This included discussions with the team, working through concerns families have about their child, exposing them to emails received from families, and meetings with allied health professionals:

> *I'm a fairly open person with students that 'this is what we're doing'. Making sure that [PST] knows what we're doing [with] the conversations that we've had, she's been exposed to emails from families that I get emails from regularly about their child, or some concerns that we might have about particular children in our group. Under our SRF [School Readiness Funding], we've had the O.T. [occupational therapist] and the speechie [speech and language pathologist] out as well, which she's been exposed to as well. Sharing with her that we're still looking at it from that perspective as. If we have another child that presents like so-and-so, should we be flagging that child for referrals? How do we have those conversations with family? She's able to be part of that when you notice something about the child and understanding at what point is it that you reach out to families. At what point is it that we do some more observations or building an understanding of which families are going to be more receptive to the conversations or*

how you need to change the conversations that you may or may not have with families. [PST] has been able to shadow us as well. (MT, Interview, Iteration 8)

The explicit questions asked by this MT assisted this PST in understanding what her future role as an ECT would likely be in working in collaborative and shared practice with families through the challenges that families face (Winship et al. 2021) and when to embark on what can be difficult conversations with families.

Understanding the journey of learning and family involvement in the service was seen as an integral part of being a developing ECT. Being committed to the cycle of learning, paying attention to the child and their family, and building a sense of teacher identity was a central focus for one MT:

I think the block placements are a fabulous idea. . . it allows students to see the learning grow, to get to know the child, plan for that child and see that cycle of learning. I think it's wonderful that students have the opportunity to come to do that second placement. I feel, particularly with the student that we have, we really support her with teacher identity and to be able to build her skills around classroom management, she's got that confidence now. I feel like already having that strong partnership with us and the families and children, she'll really get to exercise those skills that she's learned, and she won't have to go back to the start and get to know us. (MT, Interview, Iteration 7)

Being able to build a stronger sense of confidence in teaching had enabled the PST working with this MT to try out new skills that she will require as a new graduate; building strong relationships with children, families, and the team at the service meant she did not need to start from the beginning with the relationships she had already worked on developing. The conversational cycles that this PST was able to join in through engaging with the families early on and later on throughout their placement experience helped her build a sense of confidence (Sutton et al. 2020). Repeated placements were recognised in this project as being a key element of successful professional placement experiences.

The benefits of repeated placements were also highlighted by a PST about to embark on their next placement in the same setting.

You're not having to go in and go, "Oh my goodness, it's going to be so uncomfortable again. I'm meeting all these new people again." You're already going in on day one going, "I've already got the relationship there, I know all the children, I know the families, I'm coming back in", and then it makes that transition for the children and you easier. (PST, Focus Group, Iteration 7)

Making that transition easier by returning to the same setting was described as key to strengthening relationships with children and families, as described by another PST who shared her experience returning to the same service in iteration 8, describing it as comfortable for multiple stakeholders:

This is my second placement [here] Because [of EC PPP] I return to this [kindergarten] with [MT] again, I think it's more comfortable even [MT] feels more comfortable and [said], "I know what you're going to do", and she trusts me. I think the relationship is pretty good. Even [with] the families and children. . . It's more like going back to a workplace. (PST, Interview, Iteration 8)

When this PST was asked why it was so comfortable and easy, she responded as follows:

These two placements, they are not too far apart, and I already have a relationship with the children,. . .staff or families, they are very nice, we have conversations. They said, "Oh, [PST] you're back. . . Some of the children, they've got special needs. . . and [MT] is comfortable to let me to talk to Mum about how is this child going during the day. . . It's more about successful parent-teacher partnerships as a process that takes a long time. It is built through trust in a dual communicative relationship. . . It's more about conversations with parents if they are the children with special needs, how you approach them. (PST, Interview, Iteration 8)

The issue of the pressure and time that family involvement and relationships take to develop is well documented in research about teachers and PSTs working with families. (Boit 2020) describes successful family–teacher partnerships as being a process that takes a long time to enact and allows families and teachers to feel a shared sense of trust. The sense of trust in family involvement is built through "dual communicative relationships", Boit (2020).

Another MT shared her thoughts in the focus group about the PST who had returned for her second placement at the service and had since undertaken some casual relief work as an educator at the service after completing her second placement:

> *We're lucky we had our student come back for [another] two weeks and then she was with us yesterday on the excursion, and all the children are saying, "Is [PST] coming to our concert, our party night?" [I replied], "I don't know. Have you invited her?" [They asked] "Are you coming, [PST]?" the children are all planning, and all these parents are asking, "Will [PST] be there because. . . they need to buy them a present." She did six weeks with us, but they just feel that she's just part of the service. (MT, Focus Group, Iteration 9)*

The sense of not only children but families feeling like this PST was a part of the ECEC service demonstrated the strength and impact of repeated placements on the development of understanding and feeling like PSTs were connected to and a part of the ECEC setting's community.

3.3. Sharing Children's Learning with Families: A Process of Building Confidence Through Relationships

One MT shared how she had used their digital documentation and family engagement platform Storypark to invite their current PST to contribute to the documentation of children's learning as a strategy to strengthen their family involvement and build a stronger understanding of the role of planning and assessment of children's learning as an ECT:

> *I added her [PST] on Storypark as a team teacher. She can post her observations on Storypark for her focus children with the permission of parents. . . she created an individual plan for all three children, and she's linking their stories. . . doing analyses the same way we are doing it. . . She created the group plan in the similar way that we do it in our plans. (MT, Iteration 5, Focus Group)*

Another MT shared at the end of this iteration how she had facilitated and supported her PST to share her documentation with families as a strategy to build a stronger sense of understanding and importance of family involvement:

> *My PST spent a lot of time on her summative assessments, and they were lovely pieces of work, very thorough –and shared a lot with that family. . . I was thinking about encouraging PSTs to share their documentation with families. . . It's a lot of work, above and beyond, and it's thorough and it's detailed and it's so interesting, and I really want them to see the point of it. To say from the very start, "You're creating these to share with families". "This is about relationships with families, and you're creating this for them" . . . This is important stuff and you're spending time [sharing] discipline-specific language" . . . Maybe that should be the expectation, "After week 3, create your summative assessment, share it with families". That's the task. In collaboration with your mentor teacher, if you feel it's appropriate share. . .. I was actually shocked that a lot of them don't do that. (MT Interview, Iteration 5)*

This MT advocated for an adjustment to the university's placement expectations to mandate and move beyond encouraging family involvement and make sharing the PSTs' assessments of children's learning with families a key assessment criterion in the placement as a process of understanding the importance and value of family involvement in ECEC. Sharing documentation of children's learning is a key aspect of family involvement, and this assists PSTs in building a more personal relationship with children and families (Winship et al. 2021).

A PST who had previously undertaken a placement in a kindergarten had been able to share documentation with a family and build a sense of professional pride about sharing a child's learning:

> *I wrote an anecdotal report for a little girl, she was playing with blocks and was really interested in addition. I documented that and presented it to the parents and talked to them about it. They were shocked, "I didn't know that you taught things like that at kinder", and I said, "Well, if a child shows interest, yes, we do cover things like that". They were so impressed, and had no idea. . . It comes down to perception, you just play all day, there's no teaching. But actually, that documentation proved that theory wrong because. . . there's more that goes on. It was nice, I felt like I actually taught them something today. It was nice to help them to open their eyes and to actually see what learning was occurring as a result. (PST, Iteration 5, Focus Group).*

This PST shared her growing confidence in engaging in meaningful and authentic family involvement. Her placement assessment requirements did not require her to engage in family involvement; however, it was clear that there were benefits from her doing so. In this scenario, this PST was able to tell the family about the learning opportunities that their child was engaged in, and in doing so, she was able to promote the role of the ECT and the benefits of ECEC. While professional placement opportunities are long-established as an integral component of successful ECTE (Winship et al. 2021), they do not typically require a focus on building relationships with families and supporting interactions between families and PSTs. However, authentic opportunities where PSTs "interact and communicate with families face-to-face" (Winship et al. 2021) may "prove essential to pre-service teachers' ability to foster positive relationships" (Sutton et al. 2020). Including a requirement for PSTs to engage in family involvement as a key part of their professional placement experiences could build a stronger awareness of this requirement being an integral element of successful professional placement experiences for PSTs, MTs, and families.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, through the process of analysis in this study, we have shared how an enhanced professional placement project enabled PSTs to focus on family involvement. Using an iterative methodological approach to this 5-year project meant that feedback and insight shared by the participants actively informed future iterations and placements for this project. Insights gained through this project's iterations informed structural changes that impacted not only the participants involved in this project but also the undergraduate early childhood degree program at the university. This was due to the reconfiguration of a placement to be included in the first week of term one in order to support PSTs to experience the busiest time of the year for an ECT. During this placement, they were actively involved in working with families in their first instance of starting in the ECEC setting and more intimately understanding the complex role of the ECT when embarking on a new year of teaching. This project provided PSTs with authentic and meaningful opportunities to involve families while on placement. This included opportunities to engage families in their child's learning through sharing documentation of children's learning, being engaged with allied health professionals and other ECTs in the ECEC setting, and connecting with families as they worked through their shared concerns for children as part of the ECEC team. The collaborative and supportive placements enriched relationships between PSTs and families, helped PSTs to build a stronger sense of connection to the early childhood community, and helped the research team to more closely understand the important elements of a successful professional placement program. The main obstacles to family involvement in this project included COVID-19 restrictions and physical distancing, disrupting family involvement, and the gap in literature on family involvement during PST placements. This presents an opportunity for further research into this topic.

Future research should be conducted to more closely examine and evaluate the experiences of new graduate and early career ECTs to understand more about the possible

long-term impacts and benefits of the enhanced professional placement and how this has impacted PSTs' understanding and enactment of family involvement in ECEC settings.

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